



THE ART OF  
E. M. FORSTER

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H. J. OLIVER

MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
ON BEHALF OF  
THE AUSTRALIAN HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL





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# THE ART OF E. M. FORSTER



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## PREFACE

IN THE following pages my main concern is with Mr Forster's achievement in fiction, particularly in the novel. I have therefore given no separate consideration to his two volumes of essays, *Abinger Harvest* and *Two Cheers for Democracy*, his biographies, *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson* and *Marianne Thornton*, his Indian journal, *The Hill of Devi*, or his Alexandria books, *Pharos and Pharillon* and *Alexandria: A History and Guide*; but from all of them I have felt free to quote where they seemed to me to throw light on the fiction.

There have been at least three other book-length studies of E. M. Forster (one of them, James McConkey's, being published after my study was written). The best known of these, and I think the best, is Lionel Trilling's, published in 1944. My excuses for adding yet another are that in my opinion Professor Trilling's work can sometimes be corrected, and more often supplemented, in matters of interpretation; and that he had not the advantage of being able to refer to all the essays now included in *Two Cheers for Democracy* or to *The Hill of Devi*.

That part of chapter 3 of my book which deals with Mr Forster's early novels was published, at the invitation of the editors, in *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Minneapolis, 1957) and is here reprinted with their full approval. I have made some alterations but they are minor.

My page references to the novels and *Aspects of the Novel* are taken from the uniform Pocket Edition of 1947. (Other references are given in full as required.) All Mr Forster's works except the short stories are published by Edward Arnold and Co.; the short stories come from Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd.

I wish to express my gratitude to my friend Professor I. R. Maxwell, of the University of Melbourne, who read the book as first drafted and in spite of some differences of opinion helped me with several suggestions and more than one correction.

H.J.O.

Sydney, 1959



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## INTRODUCTION

MR FORSTER, in one of his essays, has confessed his dislike of the 'forbidding' word 'culture' but has admitted that he cannot improve on it and must himself use it. With a similar hesitation, one may begin with the suggestion that Forster's own work is the most interesting product of the cultured mind in modern literature.

In making such a suggestion, to be sure, one's hesitation would not be only, or even principally, over the use of the word 'cultured'. 'Modern' might rather be queried, since Forster, born in 1879, is no longer a 'modern' novelist in the strict chronological sense; indeed it is often forgotten that *Where Angels Fear to Tread* was published in the same year (1905) as Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*. Nor is Forster 'modern' in technique; although he appreciates, he has not imitated the experiments of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and their followers. His subject matter, however, is modern; and although most novelists have written, in a way, of personal relationships—Jane Austen certainly wrote of them—Forster's point of view, without ceasing to be strongly individual, is characteristic of the twentieth century, and perhaps possible only in it. To apply a line of reasoning which he himself follows in his analysis of 'English Prose between 1918 and 1939', it is the twentieth century's 'conscious knowledge' of psychology<sup>1</sup> that makes possible an examination of human motives and conflicts of the kind found in his novels. Only a modern artist would write novels which have so many levels of significance and which, one might say, explore the meaning of life itself.

The use of the word 'cultured' to describe Forster's art is less likely to be questioned; and it is typical of the man and the novelist that the two literary symbols which run through his novels should have been derived from his own educational background and should relate to culture even in the narrower sense of the word.

It was his early education at Tonbridge School that provided him with what was to develop into the first important symbol of his novels: the Tonbridge of real life apparently suggested,

<sup>1</sup> *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London, 1951), p. 282.

however indirectly, the 'Sawston' of the fiction.<sup>2</sup> 'Sawston' bears to nineteenth-century Tonbridge much the same relationship as Thackeray's 'Slaughter-house' bore to Charterhouse; and it symbolizes, roughly, education without culture. Perhaps the difference is that Thackeray did not really believe that the public school influenced the English character for the worse (certainly he did not believe it when he wrote *The Newcomes*). Sawstonism, however, is dangerous; its products, in the words of 'Notes on the English Character' from the book of essays *Abinger Harvest*, go forth into life

with well-developed bodies, fairly developed minds, and undeveloped hearts. And it is this undeveloped heart that is largely responsible for the difficulties of Englishmen abroad. An undeveloped heart—not a cold one. The difference is important . . .

For it is not that the Englishman can't feel—it is that he is afraid to feel. He has been taught at his public school that feeling is bad form (p. 5).

So great, in fact, is Forster's distaste for the public school boarding-house system that in his biography of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, he marvels why it 'continues at all, and why the middle classes still insist on so much discomfort for their children at such expense to themselves' (p. 25).

The second vital symbol, although at the opposite extreme from Sawston, is likewise derived from Forster's own experience. It is Cambridge—the symbol for true culture. Forster went up to King's in 1897 and took 'seconds' in the Classical Tripos Part I and the Historical Tripos Part II, having changed from classics to history in his fourth year. (Both studies left their marks on his work, the former particularly on the short stories, the latter notably on the essays and the biographical sketches comprising the section of *Abinger Harvest* called 'The Past'.) Of Forster's feeling for Cambridge itself, there is adequate record in *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson*:

He had no idea what Cambridge meant—and I remember having the same lack of comprehension about the place myself, when my own turn came to go up there. It seems too good to be real. That the public school is not infinite and eternal, that there is something more compelling in life than team-work and more vital than cricket, that firmness, self-complacency and fatuity do not between them compose the whole armour of man, that lessons may have to do with leisure and grammar with literature—it is difficult for an

<sup>2</sup> There is, of course, a village called Sawston near Cambridge.

inexperienced boy to grasp truths so revolutionary, or to realise that freedom can sometimes be gained by walking out through an open door (p. 26).

The Cambridge 'spirit' is then analysed in a passage dealing with discussion societies in the University, where the young men 'seek truth rather than victory' and 'do not feel diffidence too high a price to pay for integrity'.

Certainly these societies represent the very antithesis of the rotarian spirit. No one who has once felt their power will ever become a good mixer or a yes-man. Their influence, when it goes wrong, leads to self-consciousness and superciliousness; when it goes right, the mind is sharpened, the judgment is strengthened, and the heart becomes less selfish (p. 66).

On Forster himself, most will agree, Cambridge influence went 'right'—so much so, that little else about his biography is important to a student of his work. The remainder of his life seems to have centred on King's College, Cambridge, of which he became a Fellow in 1927, and on Abinger, the Surrey village where he once led 'a leisurely, retired life' and after which, presumably on the precedent of *Winterslow* and, perhaps, *Walden*, he has named his volume of collected essays.

Too much importance has perhaps been attached to Forster's occasional association in the early years of the century with the Bloomsbury group of writers, although it is possible that, like others of the group, he was influenced by the ethical theory of G. E. Moore.<sup>3</sup> More significant, one feels, for his literary work were his travels. These included a first journey to Greece in 1901 (reflected in some of the short stories);<sup>4</sup> a period at Alexandria during the 1914-18 war (leading to *Alexandria: A History and Guide*, written in 1922 and revised in 1938, and *Pharos and Pharillon*, a 'collection of essays on Alexandrian themes' ancient and modern, in 1923); and at least three journeys to India (*A Passage to India* was drafted after the first of these in 1912-13 but completed after the second, of 1921; and *The Hill of Devi*, published in 1953, has

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, J. K. Johnstone, *The Bloomsbury Group* (London, 1954) and William Van O'Connor, 'Toward a History of Bloomsbury', *Southwest Review*, XL.i (Winter 1955).

<sup>4</sup> In a brief preface to the twenty-third edition of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson's *The Greek View of Life* (London, 1956), Forster has quoted with approval Dickinson's account of what his first visit to Greece meant to him: 'It was like hearing music at last played in tune after a long perversion by slight discords' and has added that he himself had the same experience when he returned to Greece in the spring of 1956.

given a full account of the second sojourn, when Forster was for six months Acting Private Secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior. The third visit was in 1945.)

Forster is not, however, the kind of novelist who, like Ernest Hemingway, needs to go in search of his material, or lead an active life in order to write about it. The subject matter of his fiction has rather, as it were, come to him; his novels are the result not so much of experience—in the usual meaning of adventure and action—as of observation and reflection. He has even gone so far as to say, if we may believe P. N. Furbank and F. J. H. Haskell, who interviewed him at Cambridge in June 1952: 'In no book have I got down more than the people I like, the person I think I am, and the people who irritate me. This puts me among the large body of authors who are not really novelists, and have to get on as best they can with these three categories. We have not the power of observing the variety of life and describing it dispassionately'.<sup>5</sup> (The last sentence, however, we may feel free to modify.)

There is a sense in which it would be true to say that his interests have continued to be focussed on Cambridge and on what Cambridge stands for. It would nevertheless be quite wrong to picture Forster as a purely academic writer; it would be even further from the truth to claim that he is a passive one. For passivity also implies acceptance; and Forster does not mildly acquiesce in the state of society. His is a critical talent although he is a humanist—or because he is one; and significantly he has always been willing to take part in one fight—the fight against infringements of human liberty. His championing of the individual carries over naturally to the condemning of regimentation in all guises. So in 1939 he served on the Lord Chancellor's Committee to examine the law of Defamatory Libel; he wrote tellingly against Fascism in the Macmillan War Pamphlet *Nordic Twilight* in 1940; and he has always opposed censorship in any form. The censoring mind therefore receives his full ridicule, most obviously in 'Mrs. Grundy at the Parkers', another of the essays in *Abinger Harvest*.

Mr. Nosey Parker . . . excelled . . . on committees. . . . Mr. Parker . . . had only to say 'We must think of our daughters' and everyone thought of their skins. He had only to say 'I am not narrow-minded, but . . .' and broadness became impossible. He raised the banner of respectability and called it idealism (p. 18).



Forster's interests are not then, in any ordinary sense, narrow, and he is certainly not afraid to speak out; he has nevertheless written only five novels, the last in 1924. (An unpublished one is said to have been deposited in the British Museum; and another, entitled *Arctic Summer*, was begun in 1914 but never finished. It was read by the author in 1951 at the Aldeburgh Festival.) It has long been clear that there was little likelihood of other novels being written. Mr McConkey has suggested that in *A Passage to India* Forster 'has comprehended finally his own problem and come to terms with it . . .' and that 'the long silence which has followed the publication of the novel is an indication that he has found those terms to be as satisfactory as possible'.<sup>6</sup> My own explanation would be almost the exact opposite of this and would be that Forster, who refuses to see life 'steadily', can see enough of its 'wholeness' or its complexity to make him feel hesitant about trying to put into novel-form what ceases to be true when stated, even when it is, in the words of Katherine Mansfield, beautifully whispered as a half-truth and not solemnly shouted as a whole one. Other artists, feeling such a limitation on the novel-form, might have turned to poetry or to drama. But verse Forster apparently writes rarely (his published work includes only two very amusing but slight poems, and his only two lines of modern poetry, he has told us, were composed in a dream); and although he has written a pageant for the village of Abinger and one or two unpublished plays, or parts of them, he could not write regularly for the stage and for actors: 'the weight they throw is incalculable, and how any work of art survives their arrival I do not understand.'

Moreover, already in 1935 he had shown his awareness of other difficulties that, rightly or wrongly, he felt limited his effectiveness as a writer. Speaking on 'Liberty in England', in an address to the International Congress of Writers in Paris, in 1935, he gave another reason for his reticence:

My colleagues . . . may say that if there is another war writers of the individualistic and liberalizing type, like myself and Mr. Aldous Huxley, will be swept away. I am sure that we shall be swept away, and I think furthermore that there may be another war. . . . This being so, my job, and the job of those who feel with me, is an interim job. We have just to go on tinkering as well as we can with our old tools until the crash comes. When the crash comes, nothing is any good. After it—if there is an after—the task

6 James McConkey, *The Novels of E. M. Forster* (Cornell, 1957), p. 160.

of civilization will be carried on by people whose training has been different from my own.<sup>7</sup>

He has accordingly long been content with biography and with reviews and short articles—not all collected even now, after *Two Cheers for Democracy*.

No major work has followed *A Passage to India*; and one writer was unable to resist the quip that E. M. Forster is the greatest novelist who has ever made a reputation by *not* writing novels. It is no depreciation of his work in criticism and the essay to say that the loss is ours.

<sup>7</sup> *Abinger Harvest*, p. 67.

## SUBJECT AND METHOD

FORSTER'S five published novels treat, with varying degrees of complexity, and of success, the one theme—the supreme importance of personal relationships; and all are written in the same manner. Of both theme and manner we have also his direct exposition, the one in the Hogarth pamphlet, *What I Believe* (1939—now reprinted in *Two Cheers for Democracy*), the other in *Aspects of the Novel* (the Clark lectures at Cambridge in 1927). Both these, it will be noticed, are later in date than the novels they help to explain; they are none the less valuable for that, and indeed they form probably the best introduction to the fiction. An examination of them at this point also gives the opportunity of assessing Forster's theory before one comes to his practice.

The personal creed that Forster has expressed through his novels he has, then, himself summed up for us in *What I Believe*. The crucial opening pages are well known and need not be quoted in full, but the main statements are worth recalling:

I do not believe in Belief. But this is an age of faith, and there are so many militant creeds that, in self-defence, one has to formulate a creed of one's own. . . . Tolerance, good temper and sympathy—they are what matter really, and if the human race is not to collapse they must come to the front before long. But for the moment they are not enough. . . . They want stiffening, even if the process coarsens them. Faith, to my mind, is a stiffening process, a sort of mental starch, which ought to be applied as sparingly as possible. I dislike the stuff. I do not believe in it, for its own sake, at all . . .

I have, however, to live in an Age of Faith . . . And I have to keep my end up in it. . . . And since to ignore evidence is one of the characteristics of faith, I certainly can proclaim that I believe in personal relationships.

Starting from them, I get a little order into the contemporary chaos. One must be fond of people and trust them if one is not to make a mess of life, and it is therefore essential that they should not let one down. They often do. The moral of which is that I must, myself, be as reliable as possible, and this I try to be. But reliability is not a matter

of contract—that is the main difference between the world of personal relationships and the world of business relationships. It is a matter for the heart, which signs no documents.

Forster knew well that his creed of personal relationships might be despised—though he perhaps need not have been so pessimistic about the support his ‘faith’ could command, and it could even be shown, I think, that his philosophy has a great deal in common with the creeds of other twentieth-century writers, including writers otherwise as diverse as, say, Conrad and Faulkner. Conrad’s ‘fidelity’, for example, although expressed perhaps in terms of a person’s duty to himself rather than his duty to others, is equally opposed to the dominance of mere political or other ‘causes’ and is equally ‘a matter for the heart’; and as Faulkner made clear in his speech on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, human dignity and man’s duty to man have always been basic in his scheme of values also. But what Forster wanted to stress, of course, was that some of the most widely held of modern political beliefs were actually inconsistent with such a creed as his of ‘personal relationships’; and so he cheerfully committed himself to the pronouncement that has so often since been quoted out of its context: ‘I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country. . . . Love and loyalty to an individual can run counter to the claims of the State. When they do—down with the State, say I, which means that the State would down me’ (pp. 77-8).

Holding this belief, the author continues, he gives his political affiliation to democracy. The democratic state is not perfect but it is ‘less hateful than other contemporary forms of government, and to that extent it deserves our support’. Elsewhere, in the address on ‘Liberty in England’, he has explained that he is not a Fascist—‘Fascism does evil that evil may come’: ‘And you may have guessed that I am not a Communist, though perhaps I might be one if I was a younger and a braver man, for in Communism I can see hope. It does many things which I think evil, but I know that it intends good.’<sup>1</sup>

‘The Last Parade’, in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, amplifies this by suggesting that we ought to be grateful to Russia, even if we are ‘scared at Marxism’, because Russia ‘has tried to put men into touch with things’, the things that money can buy, instead of money itself, which has usurped too much of

<sup>1</sup> *Abinger Harvest*, p. 63.

the attention of the world. Forster would, however, be completely opposed to, say, the Marxist interpretation of history, for he has written that 'The true history of the human race is the history of human affection. In comparison with it all other histories—including economic history—are false'.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore not surprising that politics as such play no real part in the novels, even in *A Passage to India*.

So he gives two cheers for Democracy: 'one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three. Only Love the Beloved Republic deserves that' (p. 79). He cannot see any probability of the millennium and finds no solace at all in hero-worship. Unlike Carlyle, he distrusts great men, with a profound distrust: 'they produce a desert of uniformity around them and often a pool of blood too, and I always feel a little man's pleasure when they come a cropper.'

I believe in aristocracy, though—if that is the right word, and if a democrat may use it. Not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. . . . They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos (p. 82).

Possible misinterpretation of the novels may be avoided if it is remembered that Forster goes on to ask his readers whether they would agree with him that asceticism is not a characteristic of this new 'aristocracy':

I am against asceticism myself. I am with the old Scotsman who wanted less chastity and more delicacy . . . Still, I do not insist. This is not a major point. It is clearly possible to be sensitive, considerate and plucky and yet be an ascetic too, and if anyone possesses the first three qualities, I will let him in! (p. 83).

It will also be clear from this that life to Forster is not a tragedy—and that is no doubt partly why (although there are deaths in plenty in his novels!) he chooses to write in the great tradition of the comic novel of manners, the tradition of his admired Jane Austen, one of the three writers whom he 'would like to have in every room, so that I can stretch out my hand for them at any moment' (the others are Shakespeare and Gibbon).<sup>3</sup> He is not distressed, in the way of the great tragic writer, by human fallibility, and would probably think it

<sup>2</sup> 'De Senectute', *The London Magazine*, IV, ii (November 1957) pp. 15-18.

<sup>3</sup> 'In My Library', *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 312.

pointless to write about perfection. What he does lament, however, is that private virtue is so rarely carried over, as it could be carried, into public affairs. He believes that if ever there is a Saviour in the future, he will merely have to 'make effective the good will and the good temper which are already existing'. And he does not believe that such a change can be made by Christianity: Christianity, which 'was a spiritual force once', is no longer so.

This manifesto, if one may call it that, needs no expanding, unless it be in words which Forster has used of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson—'people, music, books and scenery—the four gifts he loved most'. Music and books—indeed all forms of art—play an unusually prominent part in Forster's novels, and scenery is often beautifully described. But 'personal relationships' remain the core of his 'philosophy'; and many readers have felt this philosophy to be more appealing than that of any other writer of today.

There has, to be sure, been one significant attack on it—by Mr D. S. Savage, in his book *The Withered Branch* (London, 1950). Here Forster is accused of not seeing beneath democracy to 'its capitalistic and therefore incipiently totalitarian substructure' (p. 47). The matter perhaps hardly concerns a student of Forster's art, who may choose to maintain that an artist's beliefs are irrelevant to his artistic success. But this is by no means the only possible answer; for in fact, as has been pointed out, Forster *has* said that democracy is not perfect, and has distinguished it from totalitarianism—and for all one knows he may have seen what Savage accuses him of not seeing. The important point, of course, is that he has chosen to write about something else—a privilege that cannot be denied him.

When Savage goes on to blame Forster for not appraising above personal relationships the permanent ethical values, one is tempted to reply, with George Bernard Shaw's Andrew Undershaft, that if Mr Savage knows what these values are, he has 'knowledge of the secret that has puzzled all the philosophers, baffled all the lawyers, muddled all the men of business, and ruined most of the artists: the secret of right and wrong'. Forster would certainly not claim such knowledge; part of his merit, it must be repeated, is the diffidence that comes not from a fear of saying what he thinks but from an awareness of complexity. 'We are urged, by bishops and captains of industry', he writes in 'Post-Munich', 'to face facts, and we ought to. But we can only face them by being double-faced. The facts lie in opposite directions, and no exhortation will

group them into a single field. No slogan works.<sup>4</sup> Even so, one may feel that Forster is saying more than Savage allows him to say. The critic complains that 'an inner spiritual change which affects one's attitude to one or two other selected persons only, and does not extend itself to include every other human being irrespective of social distinction, is invalidated from the start' (p. 56). This is to misrepresent Forster's position. In 1935 he wrote in 'The Menace to Freedom':

The desire to devote oneself to another person or persons seems to be as innate as the desire for personal liberty. If the two desires could combine, the menace to freedom from within, the fundamental menace, might disappear, and the political evils now filling all the foreground of our lives would be deprived of the poison which nourishes them.<sup>5</sup>

And in 'Tolerance' (1941) he faces up to just such an attitude as Savage's and replies:

Love is a great force in private life; it is indeed the greatest of all things; but love in public affairs does not work. It has been tried again and again . . . And it has always failed . . . In public affairs, in the rebuilding of civilisation, something much less dramatic and emotional is needed, namely, tolerance . . . This is the only force which will enable different races and classes and interests to settle down together to the work of reconstruction.<sup>6</sup>

Almost as if he were anticipating the objection that this attitude is selfish and not truly 'spiritual', he goes on to say that tolerance demands imagination, 'for you have all the time to be putting yourself in someone else's place. Which is a desirable spiritual exercise' (p. 58).

It is also unfair to imply that Forster's *interests* are limited by 'social distinction'. The problems of social difference are discussed in *Howards End*; and of clerks like Leonard Bast who 'would have died sooner than confess any inferiority to the rich', the novelist comments:

This may be splendid of him. But he was inferior to most rich people, there is not the least doubt of it. He was not as courteous as the average rich man, nor as intelligent, nor as healthy, nor as lovable. His mind and his body had been alike underfed, because he was poor, and because he was modern they were always craving better food (p. 48).

This is hardly the kind of social analysis that Savage's account would lead one to expect; and, notably, neither in *Howards*

<sup>4</sup> *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

End nor in the earlier novels was there any limitation of Forster's sympathy to one class. (The briefest glance at *Where Angels Fear to Tread* will show this.) Nor are many writers as critical of social snobbery as Forster can be when he chooses. The broadcast talk on 'The Challenge of Our Time' contains an indictment of the moneyed Victorians, including himself, who 'did not realise that all the time we were exploiting the poor of our own country and the backward races abroad, and getting bigger profits from our investments than we should'<sup>7</sup>; and there are many relevant observations in *Marianne Thornton*. He can easily reconcile himself to the modern social revolutions. 'The poor have kicked. The backward races are kicking—and more power to their boots.' He can see the necessity for new economics and even for 'planning and ration books and controls.' But 'the doctrine of *laissez-faire* is the only one that seems to work in the world of the spirit'—and it is for that reason, surely, that he would stop far short of the position Savage would wish him to take up.

Savage goes on to claim that Forster's values are wrong because the life he portrays is wrong (he does not always portray it, incidentally). This life, 'of the irresponsible, moneyed, puritanical bourgeoisie, is false, because it is based upon social falsehood, and nothing can ever be made really right within it. Consequently, no stable system of moral symbolism can be erected upon it'. The logical fallacy is patent: was no true conclusion ever drawn from false premises? One's main protest again, however, must be that in fact Forster's moral values are not 'erected upon' any social system; they are independent; and of all social systems he is critical. Savage's real difficulty is that he believes the social theme to be the only one worth writing about, and his criticism of Forster is really no more than a statement of his own preferences in literary subject matter.

Savage noticeably passes quickly over *A Passage to India*, but he does say of it that 'the ugly realities underlying the presence of the British in India are not even glanced at, and the issues raised are handled as though they could be solved on the surface level of personal intercourse and individualistic behaviour' (p. 47).<sup>8</sup> There is perhaps some unconscious misrepresentation even here. What Forster is suggesting is, not

<sup>7</sup> *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Henderson had similarly complained (*The Novel Today*, London, 1936, p. 92) that 'Unfortunately . . . Forster fails to see his unbearable British officials as the instruments of a deliberately planned colonial policy'.



that satisfactory personal relationships will solve political problems, but that they are the first step towards such a solution. Without them, everything goes wrong. If there were any doubt on the matter *The Hill of Devi* would remove it. In a letter originally written in 1921, Forster emphasized that 'I don't mean that good manners can avert a political upheaval. But they can minimise it, and come nearer to averting it in the East than elsewhere' (p. 155—the whole letter should be consulted). And in the account of the last years of the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior, he is able to give a convincing example of the way in which a lack of personal sympathy helped towards a political, as well as a personal, tragedy.

We must allow Forster his belief in personal relationships, as a legitimate literary theme. The question will rather be what he makes of that theme; and perhaps what does emerge from Savage's criticism and his misunderstanding is the suggestion that Forster's creed may be a difficult one to express adequately in fictional form.

One turns, therefore, with eagerness to *Aspects of the Novel*, to discover what he conceives the possibilities of the novel-form to be. *Aspects of the Novel* must be, even if it is not regarded as profound aesthetic theory, an illuminating document for all who study Forster's own fiction.

'The final test of a novel', he is quite happy to say, 'will be our affection for it, as it is the test of our friends, and of anything else which we cannot define.' But analysis must be attempted, and analysis is difficult, particularly because 'the intensely, stiflingly human quality of the novel is not to be avoided; the novel is sogged with humanity; there is no escaping the uplift or the downpour, nor can they be kept out of criticism' (p. 26).

Forster begins his analysis, in his second lecture, with the story; and the opening passage is central to his position (and, somewhat ironically, is perhaps the best known single passage he has written). He distinguishes, it will be remembered, three possible attitudes to the 'story-telling aspect' of the novel. There is the man who vaguely supposes that a novel 'kind of tells a story, so to speak'; there is the man who has no use for the novel if it doesn't tell a story:

And a third man, he says in a sort of drooping regretful voice, 'Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story'. I respect and admire the first speaker. I detest and fear the second. And the third is myself. Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could

not exist. That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form (p. 27).

Story Forster regrets because a story caters for the interest in what happened next—a mere matter of time—whereas what is important is the value or intensity of experience; and the novelist does better to work, as does memory, in these non-temporal terms. Accordingly, Forster does not care for Scott and finds 'it difficult to understand his continued reputation', for Scott is merely a story-teller, with no passion, no sense of values and no sense of construction, being content, for example, with 'that idiotic use of marriage as a finale'. Rose Macaulay rightly pointed out that there is more to be said of Scott;<sup>9</sup> but to me she does not seem to succeed in refuting Forster's basic criticisms, which, indeed, it would be difficult to answer.

'The life in time is so obviously base and inferior,' Forster continues, that Gertrude Stein tried to abolish it. She failed, he suggests, and failed because words and sentences themselves have an order in time and once that is abolished, literature ceases. Here, of course, there is much more to be said, and it is interesting to note that Forster has since said that he underrated James Joyce in *Aspects of the Novel*. Part of the importance of Joyce is surely that in *Ulysses* as well as *Finnegans Wake* he did try to abolish and, I should say, succeeded in abolishing the tyranny of the sentence. Joyce has shown that you can, under certain conditions, 'abolish' the life in time; 'the novel that would express values only', to use Forster's phrase, does *not*, then, necessarily become 'unintelligible and therefore valueless'. Ideally, a novel would presumably express both the life in time and 'the life by values'; and such a novel has been written, more than once. The combination was the aim of nearly all the experimenting of Joseph Conrad; and *Lord Jim* is only one example of the novel in which fiction is quite ably, by rearrangement of events, 'emancipated from the tyranny of time'. *Lord Jim* may be difficult but is in no way unintelligible. It does express 'the life by values'; indeed it raises the whole question of what the proper values of life are. (It may be significant that Conrad is the one writer whom Forster, in his normally appreciative critical work, consistently underrates.)

From story, in *Aspects of the Novel*, he proceeds to people,

<sup>9</sup> *The Writings of E. M. Forster* (London, 1938), pp. 227-9.

and makes his well-known distinction between 'flat' and 'round' characters. 'The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round.' There is, he suggests, a place for flat characters in a novel, but probably never when they are tragic. (The distinction between tragic and comic here is perhaps rather facile; and one wonders, for example, whether the flatness of Blifil in *Tom Jones* is to be excused or not, on these grounds.)

About the fashionable problems of the 'point of view' (fashionable after Percy Lubbock's famous study, *The Craft of Fiction*) Forster is not greatly concerned:

A novelist can shift his view-point if it comes off, and it came off with Dickens and Tolstoy. Indeed this power to expand and contract perception (of which the shifting view-point is a symptom), this right to intermittent knowledge:—I find it one of the great advantages of the novel-form . . . A quantity of novelists, English novelists especially, have behaved like this to the people in their books: played fast and loose with them, and I cannot see why they should be censured.

They must be censured if we catch them at it at the time (p. 78).

This, it may confidently be said, is inadequate. One wants to know whether Dickens and Tolstoy may not have succeeded in spite of their changing point of view rather than because of it, whether they would not have been better novelists still had they been consistent. And a Henry James might well want to know not only how any reader worth his salt can fail to 'catch a novelist at it' when the novelist changes his point of view, but also whether the only test of a work of art is in the reader's perception and whether consistency is not an artistic virtue in itself.

From most of these problems, however, Forster is saved in his own novels by the choice of the omniscient method, a method which he uses brilliantly. Yet perhaps there is a similar danger there that he does not fully avoid. I mean that a novelist who chooses to be omniscient is particularly liable to be 'caught at it' if he does not remain so; and there have been readers who have wanted to know why Forster could not sometimes tell us *more* (for example, about Mrs Wilcox in *Howards End*). To the opposite danger, however, of telling us too much, he is alert: the novelist had 'better not take the reader into his confidence about his characters'. The reason is sound—

'Intimacy is gained but at the expense of illusion and nobility'—and he dislikes the habit in Fielding and Thackeray. He does make one qualification, however, and it is an important one, namely that 'To take your reader into your confidence about the universe is a different thing' (p. 79). Here is, at the very least, a clear distinction between Forster's own method of 'editorial comment' and the commoner one, and although we may feel that the latter has been underrated, the virtues of the former we will not now deny.

From people, in his analysis of the novel, he passes to plot. Plot is to be distinguished from mere story. Story answers the question 'And then?' but plot answers the question 'But why?'. Plot, then, deals with causality, and appeals to the reader's intelligence and memory, not merely to his curiosity; and the final impression of a good plot will be of 'something aesthetically compact, something which might have been shown by the novelist straight away, only if he had shown it . . . it would never have become beautiful' (beauty being a quality 'at which a novelist should never aim, though he fails if he does not achieve it').

'Characters, to be real, ought to run smoothly,' Forster says. This perhaps contradicts what he has already said about the round character, that 'if it never surprises, it is flat'. But the contradiction may be only apparent: the fact of the matter would seem to be that a character is 'round' when its seeming inconsistency is seen to be explained by some deeper quality, a consistency that had hitherto remained hidden; and in this sense even a round character might be said to run smoothly. When, however, Forster asserts that 'a plot ought to cause surprise', and one asks why, the answer seems to be merely that otherwise the characters are required to subordinate themselves to the plot. Hardy is criticized because 'he has emphasized causality more strongly than his medium permits'; in Hardy, it is said, we have fate above us instead of fate working through us.

Here, surely, there is a fallacy. It is true that in *The Return of the Native*, for example, there is elaborate use of surprise and coincidence; and it has been claimed that it is no use objecting to this, since the prevalence of coincidence is itself the point Hardy is trying to make. But that is not a full answer. If coincidence is the fact Hardy wishes to stress, then what *The Return of the Native* shows (and so far I am with Forster) is that the author's mere assertion that one unlucky chance led to another is unsatisfactory. But this is to say that emphasis on causality, in this sense, is inadequate, not that it is super-

fluous or overdone. The fact of coincidence, as Henry James might have said, has been asserted but not shown. The lesson to be learnt from Hardy is that the novelist who wishes to make surprise a feature of his plot will need some particularly sophisticated technique, to convince the reader, as it were, that the occurrence of the surprising in life is not surprising. Of such a technique James or Conrad would be capable, but not, I think, Hardy. Failing such a technique, mere direct statement of causality is certainly insufficient; failing such a technique, Forster's casual introduction of surprise—so casual that we wonder momentarily whether he can really expect us to believe, for example, that Gerald was broken up in that football match in *The Longest Journey*—may be the best method left. It may be better than Hardy's, but it is still a second-best. And not all of us have, like Forster, 'the sort of mind which likes to be taken unawares.'<sup>10</sup>

Forster, then, cannot see a fully satisfactory way out of the difficulty; he sees plot in the novel as fighting a losing battle with the characters (and it certainly does precisely that in his own work). Why, he asks, 'has a novel to be planned? Cannot it grow? Why need it close, as a play closes? Cannot it open out?' And his answer seems to be 'no, not yet'—unless in fantasy and 'prophecy' (which he proceeds to treat).

He goes on to make a distinction between pattern, of which plot is one element, and rhythm. Rhythm in fiction is perhaps only partial, but not therefore worthless: 'the effect can be exquisite, it can be obtained without mutilating the characters, and it lessens our need of an external form'. (This can best be discussed in detail when Forster's own novels are considered.) Pattern is the overall shape of a book. Forster thinks Henry James sacrifices life to pattern; James's critic, H. G. Wells, he admits, sacrifices pattern to life—and 'my own prejudices are with Wells'. And why cannot we have both? (Wells, we must protest, is not a test of much in the craft of fiction!) The answer seems to be: because of the very nature of the novel, which because of its 'humanity' 'is not capable of as much artistic development as the drama'.

Once again, then, we are up against Forster's modesty, that characteristic quality that here seems to verge on what we have learned to call defeatism. The novel is in fact 'capable' of more artistic development than Forster will admit. Yet in this probably false theory of the limitations of the novel-form lies partly, no doubt, the explanation of his unwillingness to continue writing

<sup>10</sup> 'A Book that Influenced Me', *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 226.

novels. The novel-form, he is convinced, just will not hold modern life entire—not, at any rate, if it is to remain formally beautiful.

But even if it cannot give us life entire, can it perhaps do something else? It can suggest, or 'expand', like music:

Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom. Cannot the novel be like that? Is not there something of it in *War and Peace*? (p. 155).

'Expansion', one may say even now, is the final effect of *A Passage to India*; and 'expansion', if achieved, is more than enough to justify one in continuing to write novels.

Summing up *Aspects of the Novel*, then, it would appear certain that the jibe that Percy Lubbock wrote a book to prove that the only way of composing a novel was like Henry James and that Forster wrote a book to prove that the only way of composing a novel was like E. M. Forster is quite unfair. What is true is that Forster's exposition of his own method is far more convincing than his criticisms of the methods of others. And what we may expect his practice to bear out is the theory that for this rather intractable material of personal relationships, the Forster method of writing a novel is as good as any other is likely to be.

## THE MINOR FICTION

BOTH BECAUSE many readers first make the acquaintance of Forster through one of the short stories (perhaps 'The Celestial Omnibus', in an anthology) and because most of these stories are early work, it is convenient to mention them briefly before passing on to the novels.

With at least one exception ('Albergo Empedocle', mentioned by Lionel Trilling<sup>1</sup> as having been published in *Temple Bar* in 1903), the short stories have now been gathered together as *The Collected Short Stories of E. M. Forster* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1947). Previously these were to be found in two collections: *The Celestial Omnibus* (1911) and *The Eternal Moment* (1928).

Forster himself refers to the stories, in his Introduction to the collected volume of 1947, as 'these fantasies'. Fantasy is indeed the quality one first notices; and the mingling of fantasy with something else is what has most commonly been criticized in them.

Forster writes that 'I like that idea of fantasy, of muddling up the actual and the impossible until the reader isn't sure which is which'.<sup>2</sup> But not everybody likes the idea; and, absurd as the comparison may be in other respects, such 'fantasies' do seem to be open to much the same objection on aesthetic grounds as are the modern stories of 'Superman'. In the latter there can be no dramatic conflict and no real tension, because the limits of possibility within which one works are constantly shifting. In the former also, there is always some such element of the purely arbitrary, and not even the 'rules' of fantasy are constantly obeyed. Some such line of criticism seems to have been taken by Dickinson, as Forster records in the biography: 'real' life was being combined with, and its values expressed through, Greek mythology; and, Dickinson commented, 'I am apt to feel the cleft' (p. 216).

The general theme of the first six stories, the *Celestial Omnibus* volume, is the conflict between the life of imagination (represented by Pan and the Faun, for example) and its 'practical' opposite. The literary skill is perhaps mainly in the

<sup>1</sup> *E. M. Forster* (London, 1944), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 227.

satirical drawing of that opposite, notably in such characters as Mr Worters, in 'Other Kingdom'. Mr Worters sees life as a battle in which he fights well, and is believed by his ward to blush all over at the thought of his own righteousness: 'if you could strip him and make him talk nobly he would look like a boiled lobster.' Indeed the skill even extends to writing *as* such a character, in the first person. A good example, if slightly exaggerated, is Mr Tytler, the narrator of 'The Story of a Panic': "I do not know anything about pictures," I put in, "and I do not pretend to know: but I know what is beautiful when I see it, and I am thoroughly content with this." Mr Tytler always 'makes a point of behaving pleasantly to Italians, however little they may deserve it' and knows that 'it is no good speaking delicately to persons of that class [the lower Italian]. Unless you put things plainly, they take a vicious pleasure in misunderstanding you.'

The merit is not only satirical, however; and there is considerable grace in the use of symbolism, for example in the use of beech-trees, woods and copses ('Habitarunt di quoque silvas') to symbolize the imaginative way of life. To such a copse of beech-trees, the copse of 'Other Kingdom', Mr Worters would like to lay down a regular path; around it he would like to have a fence. (His fiancée, to escape him, 'not practically' but 'absolutely', turns into a beech-tree). This light symbolical touch is seen continually; for example, when the boy Eustace, in 'Story of a Panic', is captured and brought back, against his will, from freedom to the house which is the false civilization he has just learnt to escape: 'He gave shrill heart-piercing screams; and the white roses, which were falling early that year, descended in showers on him as we dragged him into the house.'

None will deny the immediate charm of such a story or of 'The Curate's Friend', which begins 'It is uncertain how the Faun came to be in Wiltshire'. But that note is hard to sustain. Nor is the solution in the abandoning of realism: the story which comes closest to mere allegory, 'The Other Side of the Hedge', is to my mind the weakest.

The best (and here I differ from Professor Trilling, who prefers the 'non-fantastic stories', 'not in the genre of mythical fantasy', yet chooses 'The Road from Colonus') is probably 'The Celestial Omnibus' itself. This is the story of the boy in Surbiton (one of many suggestions that Surbiton may have contributed its name and some of its suburban characteristics to the making of Sawston?) who lights upon the way to the Heaven of poetry or imagination. He follows the old sign-post 'To



Heaven' which has been left pointing up a blind alley by that naughty and mad young man, Shelley. To this Heaven he is wafted in the omnibus which has such drivers as Sir Thomas Browne (of whose style there is a delightful reproduction), Jane Austen (who to the boy is just 'a maiden lady who was full of quiet fun. They had talked of omnibuses and also of barouche landaus') and Dante. It passes into Heaven over the rainbow of dreams, spanning an enormous gulf in which flows 'an everlasting river'. 'And as they passed over he saw three maidens rise to the surface of the pool, singing, and playing with something that glistened like a ring.' The boy's story of his adventures is disbelieved; so he takes with him next evening Mr Bons ('snob', of course, spelt backwards). Mr Bons is as out of place in the metaphorical fields of literature as Mr Worters is in the fields of Hertfordshire; he has standing, as President of the Surbiton Literary Society, but when he has arrived with the boy before the shield of Achilles he can see nothing and wants to go back. He cannot face Truth; and the story ends with the newspaper announcement of his death, in (delightful touch!) the journalistic style which the would-be litterateurs of the world often think to be literature.

It seems to me that the *blending* of elements is finer here than in the alternative version of the theme, 'The Story of a Panic', where the coming of goat-footed Pan to a party picnicking in the Italian woods is understood not by the professional artist Leyland but only by the boy Eustace (who is similarly thought mad) and the illiterate waiter Gennaro. Yet this tale, too, is remarkable enough since it is, Forster tells us, 'the first story I ever wrote'.

The stories of *The Eternal Moment* volume are, I believe, inferior to those mentioned above. In spite of Rex Warner's defence,<sup>3</sup> 'The Machine Stops', described by the author as 'a reaction to one of the earlier heavens of H. G. Wells', has basic faults: it takes a long time to make its point about the dominance of the machine, and in its lack of continuous narrative interest, if not in sheer ingenuity, it suggests that Forster is not quite at home in projecting himself into a future brave new world. Another uneven story is 'The Point of It', the theme of which is the folly of mere acquiescence, and its punishment in Hell. 'Mr Andrews' is better, with its picture of a Heaven which fulfils the expectations of men but not their hopes: 'There was even an intermediate state for those who wished it, and for the Christian Scientists a place where they

could demonstrate that they had not died.' Mr Andrews, complete with white robes and harp, comes to realize that 'we desire infinity and we cannot imagine it. How can we expect it to be granted?' He and the Turk whom he has met on his journey to the Pearly Gate have both reached their highest point when each prayed that the other, in spite of his heresy, might be allowed to enter; now they are content to leave:

As soon as they passed the gate, they felt again the pressure of the world soul. For a moment they stood hand in hand resisting it. Then they suffered it to break in upon them, and they, and all the experience they had gained, and all the love and wisdom they had generated, passed into it, and made it better.

The general theme of this second set of six stories may be defined as aspiration and damnation—damnation not through sin but through 'success', through the forgetting of proper values, or living on after the great moments of life. Forster has always preferred to the merely successful, in the words of his Hogarth *Letter to Madam Blanchard*, 'the solid fellows who suddenly jib', 'the people who carried whimsicality into action, the salt of my earth' (p. 23). But that last paragraph of 'Mr Andrews' may suggest that in the stories the treatment of this theme, however delicate, is not delicate enough. Forster does need a certain scope in which to achieve complexity or roundness, let alone 'expansion'. He succeeds better in biography than in essay, better in the novel than in even such a short story as 'The Celestial Omnibus'.

Forster's first three novels are *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (published in 1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907) and *A Room with a View* (published in 1908 but known to have been begun in 1903: the Italian half of the novel, the author has revealed, 'was almost the first piece of fiction I attempted').<sup>4</sup> In spite of Miss Elizabeth Bowen's statement that 'there has never been any question of Mr Forster's development; there never seems to have been any early work',<sup>5</sup> these are, as I think can easily be shown, relatively immature: they are less convincing statements of the theme which is treated again in *Howards End* (1910) and *A Passage to India* (1924). For this reason, and because they have so many features in common, they may be discussed together.

All three have as their central interest a conflict between

<sup>4</sup> 'A View without a Room', *Observer* (London), 27 July 1958, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Impressions* (London, 1950), p. 120.

two kinds of human beings—roughly, those who believe in personal relationships and those who do not; and each group is associated with a particular place (and the place comes to symbolize the group).

In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, the conflict is between Italy (represented, as it were, by the Italian Gino) and Sawston (represented by Mrs Herriton and her daughter, Harriet). The conflict becomes a struggle over the baby son of Gino and Lilia (Lilia being by her first marriage Mrs Herriton's daughter-in-law). The struggle comes to a climax only after Lilia's death; finally Harriet steals the baby, and he is killed.

In *The Longest Journey* (which seems to be the most autobiographical of the novels: Forster has admitted that the hero, Rickie, represents his creator more than does any other character, and Rickie even writes Forster's short story about the girl who turns into a tree) the conflict is, significantly, between Sawston, on the one hand, and Cambridge and Wiltshire on the other. Cambridge is represented by Rickie's friend Ansell ('It was contrary to his own spirit to coach people: he held the human soul to be a very delicate thing, which can receive eternal damage from a little patronage'—p. 246), Wiltshire by Stephen, Rickie's half-brother, the man of nature whose feelings are not trammelled by acquired notions of decorum. (In an early version of the novel he was called Siegfried!) Identified with Sawston are the Pembrokes—Agnes, whom Rickie eventually marries, and also her brother, Herbert, of whom this revealing analysis is made:

He was capable of affection: he was usually courteous and tolerant. Then what was amiss? Why, in spite of all these qualities, should Rickie feel that there was something wrong with him—nay, that he was wrong as a whole, and that if the Spirit of Humanity should ever hold a judgment he would assuredly be classed among the goats? . . . He [Rickie] saw that for all his fine talk about a spiritual life he [Herbert] had but one test for things—success: success for the body in this life or for the soul in the life to come. And for this reason Humanity, and perhaps such other tribunals as there may be, would assuredly reject him (pp. 187-8).

There, perhaps, is the most direct definition of Sawstonism in all Forster's work.

In *A Room with a View*, the conflict is between Italy and England or, more particularly, London. With Italy are associated the Emersons, father and son. In the father a critic has

seen suggestions of Samuel Butler.<sup>6</sup> Furbank and Haskell report Forster as denying any great influence,<sup>7</sup> but he has himself written that 'Samuel Butler influenced me a great deal . . . He, Jane Austen, and Marcel Proust are the three authors who have helped me most over my writing, and he did more than the other two to help me look at life the way I do. What is that way? It is the undogmatic way.'<sup>8</sup> Certainly Emerson Senior is the mouthpiece of many Butlerian and Forsterian concepts. Equally un-English (in this special sense) is his son George whom the heroine, Lucy, first meets in Italy and by whom she is first kissed there. Of the other party are Lucy's chaperone and cousin, Charlotte, and also Lucy's fiance, Cecil Vyse—he, particularly, being thought of as closely connected with London.

The second element the three novels have in common is their centring on a question of choice. In each of them there is a character (or group of characters) who has to decide which party to join—Italy or Sawston, Cambridge and Wiltshire or Sawston, Italy or London. And the plot is concerned primarily with the making of the decision.

In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, these focal characters are Philip Herriton and Caroline Abbott. Philip is sent by his mother, with his sister Harriet, to recover Lilia and Gino's baby after Lilia's death; Caroline Abbott, Lilia's friend, blames herself for Lilia's marriage to Gino and goes back to see justice done. She learns to see something even more important than justice—truth—and then puts the problem to Philip in a new light: 'Do you want the child to stop with his father, who loves him and will bring him up badly, or do you want him to come to Sawston, where no one loves him, but where he will be brought up well?' (p. 167).

So armed, and having learnt that Gino, for all his lack of civilized 'polish', has an attractiveness and worth of his own, Philip too sees with clearer eyes as he watches Harriet seeking to quieten Gino's baby whom she has stolen:

'Hush!' answered Harriet, and dandled the bundle laboriously, like some bony prophetess—Judith, or Deborah, or Jael. He had last seen the baby sprawling on the knees

<sup>6</sup> Lee Elbert Holt, 'E. M. Forster and Samuel Butler', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, LXI (1946), 804-19.

<sup>7</sup> *The Paris Review*, I., p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> 'The Legacy of Samuel Butler', *The Listener*, 12 June 1952, p. 955. Forster adds that when the first World War intervened in 1914, he had a contract to write a book about 'my hero'.

of Miss Abbott, shining and naked, with twenty miles of view behind him, and his father kneeling by his feet (p. 178).

The lesson Philip has to learn is that 'life was greater than he had supposed, but it was even less complete' (p. 197). Caroline, who has already learnt it, confesses that even though she is going back to a future of 'Sawston and work' she has fallen in love with Gino herself.

The central character of *The Longest Journey* is the lame scholar, Rickie. Rickie is seen first as an undergraduate in Cambridge—a Cambridge in which an Agnes Pembroke seems a mere intrusion. But, after the death of her fiance Gerald, Rickie marries her and promptly sinks into Sawstonism—so much so, that learning that he has a half-brother, Stephen, he does not even tell Stephen of the relationship. Thereafter, as the novelist tells us in his own words, 'he deteriorates . . . He remained conscientious and decent, but the spiritual part of him proceeded towards ruin' (p. 218). Actually, the remainder of the novel traces his rise again. Rickie, having learnt that Stephen is the son of his [Rickie's] mother, not of his father, as he had supposed, rejoins Stephen and leaves Agnes. Finally he saves Stephen's life by pulling him out of the way of a train when he lies drunk across a railway line; but Rickie, lame, cannot move quickly enough to save himself. Nor has he won a complete victory of the spirit; for even now he has not learnt to accept Stephen for what he is.

*A Room with a View* shows a choice finally and happily made. This time it is made by the heroine, Lucy Honeychurch, whose life has a downward and then upward movement similar to Rickie's. At first, she rejects George Emerson, leaves Florence for Rome, and accepts the hand of Cecil Vyse; but finally she rejects Cecil, rejects spinsterhood (equally dangerous apparently!—but Mr Emerson convinces her that 'passion is sanity') and accepts George. *A Room with a View* is, as Rose Macaulay says, 'the only story, long or short, by Mr Forster which ends with lovers in one another's arms, anticipating a fine and deathless future' (p. 91). But even here, it should be pointed out, they are not enjoying the usual advantages of such a situation: they are seriously discussing Charlotte—which side was she on?

It will be clear from this brief outline of theme and plots that the three novels are all, in a way, unrealistic—or, to be more exact, all go beyond mere realism: in each there is symbolism. This symbolism is not of the type which, in the famous phrase, will bite you; and it can be neglected, for the meaning of the main action is plain enough without it. But the

action is generally, as it were, on two planes, an incident will normally have two significances; X will not mean Y rather than X but will mean Y as well as X.

This is seen in its simplest form in the use of places. Forster's Italy is Italy—beautifully described, too; but his Italy is also something more, an influence, a way of life. The use of seasons is another simple example; it is not accidental that the first visit to Italy in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* is made in spring, whereas the second, which leads to the death of the baby but also to Philip's and Caroline's self-recognition, is in summer.

So it is with action. The death of Gino's baby is brought about by a collision of two carriages, Philip's and Harriet's; and there is no doubt a strong suggestion that forces like these do often work against one another, unconsciously—with perhaps the further suggestion that, just as the baby may be no worse off after the collision than he was immediately before it, it is better that those forces should work in this way. Another obvious instance is in the closing words of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Caroline has made her great confession to Philip, of her love for Gino; Philip, whose awareness has been made greater than it ever promised to be before, sees her transfigured, 'a goddess to the end'. But he does not tell her so; and as he contents himself with a prosaic 'Thank you, thank you for everything', the train in which they are travelling passes out of Italy: 'She looked at him with great friendliness, for he had made her life endurable. At that moment the train entered the San Gotthard tunnel. They hurried back to the carriage to close the windows lest the smuts should get into Harriet's eyes.'

An example of a slightly different kind, different in that it adopts a symbol widely accepted, is found towards the end of *The Longest Journey*. Stephen and Rickie, as close to each other as they will ever be, are walking home together; and Stephen, wading in a stream, sets fire to a piece of crumpled paper, to show Rickie a 'trick' with it, learnt from Mr Failing:

The paper caught fire from the match, and spread into a rose of flame. 'Now gently with me,' said Stephen, and they laid it flower-like on the stream. Gravel and tremulous weeds leapt into sight, and then the flower sailed into deep water, and up leapt the two arches of a bridge. 'It'll strike!' they cried; 'no it won't; it's chosen the left', and one arch became a fairy tunnel, dropping diamonds. Then it vanished for Rickie; but Stephen, who knelt in the water, declared that it was still afloat, far through the arch, burning as if it would burn for ever (p. 302).

The 'rose of flame' is obviously the rose of love; and for Rickie, there are limits to love. But for Stephen, in the water, close to 'nature', there are none. It is significant that it is from Mr Failing, the writer and student of art and nature, that Stephen learnt the 'trick'; and probably it is significant also that the lighted paper shows up at first only gravel and weeds but then a bridge—and so on. If the secondary meanings of the passage are not seen, the passage is not therefore worthless; but the symbolism adds a second and perhaps a third layer to the meaning and thereby gives the whole work an added richness.

The very title of *A Room with a View* is symbolical; and it may be worth noting that the symbol is repeated from the early short story, 'The Story of a Panic'. There, the boy Eustace, once Pan has visited him, cannot endure his bedroom 'with the limited . . . outlook'. 'It is too small . . . Besides I can't see anything—no flowers, no leaves, no sky; only a stone wall.' Similarly in the novel the Emersons give up to Lucy their room with a view, whereas she associates Cecil Vyse, she tells him, with a drawing-room, with no view.

There is, in this third novel, a symbolical use of place as in the first two; and similarly incidents carry more than their obvious meaning. It is noticeable that the whole story turns on three kisses—which are more than kisses. Lucy's first wrong choice is symbolized by her recoil from George Emerson's first impetuous kiss, her second wrong choice by her acceptance—the word is deliberate—of Cecil's next one. This kiss, described in Forster's finest comic style, might almost be said to be the core of the novel.

'Lucy, I want to ask something of you that I have never asked before.'

At the serious note in his voice she stepped frankly and kindly towards him.

'What, Cecil?'

'Hitherto never—not even that day on the lawn when you agreed to marry me—'

He became self-conscious and kept glancing round to see if they were observed. His courage had gone.

'Yes?'

'Up to now I have never kissed you.'

She was as scarlet as if he had put the thing most indelicately.

'No—more you have,' she stammered.

'Then I ask you—may I now?'

'Of course you may, Cecil. You might before. I can't run at you, you know.'

At that supreme moment he was conscious of nothing but

absurdities. Her reply was inadequate. She gave such a business-like lift to her veil. As he approached her he found time to wish that he could recoil. As he touched her, his gold pince-nez became dislodged and was flattened between them (p. 132).

From George's next kiss Lucy's recoil is only momentary; and it need hardly be added that for their honeymoon they return to Italy.

Perhaps in some ways *A Room with a View* is less subtle than the other two novels. But on the whole the remarkable similarity of the three of them extends even to their literary merits and weaknesses.

In all three the characterization is the first notable achievement; and of all three one could possibly make the same criticisms. The first criticism—and it relates to a fault not without precedent among writers who divide humanity into kinds—is that Forster in these early novels is much more successful with his comic treatment of the false than with his presentation of the true. He is, allowing for the difference of ideals, in exactly the same position as was Oscar Wilde in a comedy like *Lady Windermere's Fan* or *A Woman of No Importance*: the Lady Hunstantons and Lord Augustus Lortons, even the Lord Illingworths and Lord Darlingtones, are most amusing, but one cannot even momentarily believe in, let alone entirely support, the Hesters, Mrs Arbuthnots and Lady Windermers. So in his comic scenes Forster deserves Lord David Cecil's tribute that 'he brilliantly continues that delicate comedy tradition that descends through the English domestic novel from Jane Austen onwards';<sup>9</sup> the delicious solemn conversation between Lucy and Charlotte over George's first kiss, one may suggest, is almost equal to Jane Austen at her best, recorded as it is with such delicate irony that perhaps the only danger is that some readers will miss the irony and think the novelist takes his characters as seriously as they take themselves.

But is George Emerson himself convincing? I doubt it; he is seldom clear as an individual and quite lacks as presented the charm which is attributed to him by implication. His father, too, as Dr F. R. Leavis has put it, 'though not a disaster does lead one to question the substantiality of the wisdom that he seems intended to represent.'<sup>10</sup> The one exception to this

<sup>9</sup> *Poets and Story-Tellers* (London, 1949), p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> 'E. M. Forster', in *Scrutiny* vii, 2 (September 1938). The essay is reprinted, with a few modifications, in *The Common Pursuit* (London, 1952) from which I quote (p. 263).



criticism of Forster's treatment of what may be called the positive side of his theory is Gino, in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Gino reminds one somewhat, in both character and function, of Hawthorne's 'faun' Donatello (although Gino is never tempted even momentarily to join the party of the civilized); and he is convincing because Forster is aware of his vulgarity and his other faults and presents him impartially. In fact, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* has, in this way, more delicate shading than have the other two early novels; it may also have, as Virginia Woolf suggested, greater unity and harmony.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of unity and the failure to characterize what I shall continue to call, for want of a better word, the true, are both clearly seen in *The Longest Journey*, in Gerald and Stephen. With both characters Forster tries to avoid 'flatness', but the attempt is too obvious and the result is rather that each character splits in two. Gerald is particularly interesting in that he changes sides, as it were. When he is on the 'wrong' side, he is credible, though only barely so; and Forster's wit is seen at its most amusing in the first picture of him: 'Behind her there stood a young man who had the figure of a Greek athlete and the face of an English one . . . Just where he began to be beautiful the clothes started . . .' (p. 43). But Gerald is not credible at all when he later seems to stand for the true and is, as it were, recreated in Stephen, who reminds both Agnes and Rickie of him. The reader cannot forget, although the author almost forgets, that Gerald did, after all, have the face (and the mind) of that English athlete.

Stephen, also, is given faults and is credible in so far as they are concerned—in, for example, his drunkenness and general unreliability. But what Forster apparently sees as his sincere and impulsive charm does not 'come through'; and one simply does not believe, for example, that he, on the spur of the moment, goes off to the sea on an expedition to bathe just because his aunt tells him to. Rose Macaulay, speaking of Stephen's 'enormous charm' found him 'perhaps the most likable creature in Mr. Forster's gallery'.<sup>12</sup> When Peter Burra agreed,<sup>13</sup> one is sorry not to be able to do so too. But the truth would seem to be that Stephen is no more convincing than

<sup>11</sup> *The Death of the Moth* (London, 1942), p. 110.

<sup>12</sup> *The Writings of E. M. Forster*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>13</sup> In his essay 'The Novels of E. M. Forster', originally published in *The Nineteenth Century and After* (November 1934) and now reprinted as the Introduction to *A Passage to India* (Everyman's Library edition 1942).

the very virile male usually is in fiction (even in the pages of D. H. Lawrence). Forster was pleased that Burra should, in his essay, have stressed the 'belief in athletic beauty' and repeats (in his 'Author's Notes' appended to the essay) that he does in fact hold it. But the question for the critic is of the embodiment of the belief in fiction; and what a comparison with Lawrence suggests is not only the possible 'rightness' of the notion but also the difficulty of its translation into the novel-form. For once I am in agreement with Savage, who finds Stephen *inadequate* as 'the touchstone of reality and of salvation which Forster proposes' and speaks of 'the somewhat ridiculous inadequacy of the antithesis which provides the frame of reference for the novel' (p. 55).<sup>14</sup>

The reason for such inadequacy is perhaps not easy to analyse, but it comes at least partly, I think, from a simple fault. It is always the novelist's duty, even when he adopts the omniscient attitude, to *show* his characters in action, not merely to make assertions about them. And one of the faults in these early novels is that Forster does rely on assertion (the danger of his method of editorial intrusion) and sometimes, I think, assumes as proved the very point which he is trying to make. He takes sides, too obviously, with such characters as Stephen. Of him he says, for instance, that 'he had not the suburban reticence' (p. 241). To say this, of course, is to beg the question. One may feel that with more reticence Stephen would be not suburban but more likeable. The reader cannot be blamed if, when the evidence is inadequate, he withholds his assent; and there is some danger that, suspecting prejudice, he will join the opposition.

This tendency to take sides is perhaps also the principal limitation on Forster's comic power. He does not always resist the temptation—a wellnigh fatal one in a serious and subtle comic artist—to 'guy' his own creations. Looking back at the otherwise perfect description of Cecil Vyse's first kiss, we do wonder whether it was necessary for his gold pince-nez to become 'dislodged and flattened between them'. Nor was it necessary, at the end of chapter 11, to make Cecil snore. Nor do we believe that Lucy, even at her lowest ebb under the influence of Vyses and London, would have ended a letter to a cousin, even Cousin Charlotte (p. 148):

<sup>14</sup> *The Withered Branch*, pp. 53-4. Cf. Frank Swinnerton's summary of him as 'an incalculable and savage bore for whom the author has a mystical veneration' (*The Georgian Literary Scene*, Everyman's Library, 1936, p. 289).

Please do not put 'Private' outside your envelope again.  
No one opens my letters.

Yours affectionately,

L. M. Honeychurch.

Consistency has been sacrificed for the sake of the point and the laugh.

Another criticism of Forster's characterization that has often been made is that he is unable to treat the love for each other of a man and a woman. So Lord David Cecil complains that 'Sex in his stories is a curiously bloodless and un compelling affair. The only emotional relation between human beings into which he enters fully is friendship'.<sup>15</sup> A reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* (27 July 1951) certainly scored a point when he quoted from *The Longest Journey*—from the scene where Rickie sees Gerald kiss Agnes—'Her face had no expression. It stared at the intruder and never saw him. Then her lover kissed it' (p. 49) and commented on the give-away 'it'. Cecil and others want to go further still and claim that Forster is not good with women characters at all. Cecil writes: 'Since women are more instinctive than men [*sic*], they are a less fit subject for Mr Forster. His heroines are not masculine, but they are strangely sexless'.<sup>16</sup> The truth is rather, as Rex Warner has put it, that his women are brilliant 'on all occasions except when they are in love'.<sup>17</sup> It should surely also be noted that for the most part Forster deliberately chooses the comparatively sexless women to write about; and of such a character—of Caroline Abbott and still more of Adela Quested in *A Passage to India*—the criticism loses its point. One might even go further and say that of the sexless type, and of the older women, he shows an exceptional understanding.

None of these criticisms of Forster's characterization is unimportant but all of them deal with the exceptions. It is clear that for the most part his comic characterization is unequalled in modern fiction. His people do live, in their own right, apart from the story in which they are, one might say, compelled to take part—compelled by Forster's theory of the novel. (An unfavourable critic might say that the characters almost excuse the story.) Certainly there are no reservations to be made when they talk. Not one of the criticisms of Forster's characterization made or mentioned in the previous pages has to do with what the characters say. When they talk they are always credible; and Forster, wisely, always allows the dialogue

<sup>15</sup> *Poets and Story-Tellers*, p. 182.

<sup>16</sup> *Poets and Story-Tellers*, p. 198.

<sup>17</sup> *E. M. Forster*, p. 9.

to carry most of the weight of the novel (though not all of it—a point which becomes very clear from the dramatization of *A Room with a View* by Stephen Tait and Kenneth Allott. The play is very thin compared with the novel.)

It is quite another matter to claim, as Rose Macaulay and Burra claim, that Forster is one of our great story-tellers. To the average reader, plot has been Forster's weakness—as, of course, he himself practically says it is, in *Aspects of the Novel*; and it is not difficult to see faults which prevent the novels from being outstanding purely as stories.

One such fault is that the symbolism and the 'story' proper do not always blend. An incident which may be acceptable on the level of symbol may not be acceptable on the level of plot; Forster has not quite the same skill as had Melville in fusing the two. No matter how complex the symbolism of *Moby Dick* and even though the whale may symbolize something different to each character in the novel—and something different to every reader—the story is nearly always credible on the literal plane. Forster's early novels are rather in the position of the less experienced Melville's *Mardi*. It has been noted, for example, that Rickie's fainting fit when he hears for the first time of his relationship to Stephen is incredible (and, if we did believe it, the episode would do untold harm to our picture of Rickie). Or sometimes symbol and story may even seem to pull in different ways. One such instance is when Agnes Pembroke breaks into the discussion between Rickie, Ansell and their friends on the question whether the cow is really there when no one is by to look at it. We are probably meant to see in this the fatal intrusion of Sawstonism into Cambridge. What we do see in it, however, on a first reading, is just as likely to be the intrusion of a little charm and practical commonsense into a rather trite argument. If we do see that, then it is some time before we again find our bearing with the story.

A second weakness in story-telling is a curious casualness, a refusal to hide the fact that the author is pulling strings. One example of this occurs early in *The Longest Journey*, in chapter 2:

Rickie . . . said abruptly—

'I think I want to talk . . . I can't see why I shouldn't tell you most things about my birth and parentage and education.' 'Talk away. If you bore us, we have books.'

With this invitation Rickie began to relate his history. The reader who has no book will be obliged to listen to it. (p. 29).

Unless the author wishes to remind us constantly that it is only a story he is telling—and I do not see why Forster should wish to remind us at this point—there is some justification for calling this an example of lack of technique or a failure in inventiveness, just as Jane Austen's habit of having a character, at a crucial moment of the story, write a letter, betrays lack of inventive power. In this kind of 'comic' novel the weakness may not be serious; but it is a blemish on the story-telling as such. The unashamed recapitulation in the account of Rickie's mother's love affair is another example.

Thirdly, although it is in essence the same habit as the second one, there is the much discussed over-use of surprise. The first instance of this comes quite early in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*: 'As for Lilia, someone said to her, "It is a beautiful boy!" But she had died in giving birth to him' (p. 77).

There is, to be sure, some slight preparation for this announcement of Lilia's death, in the quiet remark in the previous chapter that 'she never took a solitary walk again, with one exception, till the day of her death' (p. 56). The intended effect is nevertheless of a sudden shock; and the method is repeated with the death of the baby himself. There is some indication that he is ill, when Harriet is carrying him off in the carriage (though there is no reason why he should be ill), and then the announcement of his death is made suddenly, in another short final sentence. 'The face was already chilly, but thanks to Philip it was no longer wet. Nor would it again be wetted by any tear' (p. 183). In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, however, this dropping of a stone into the still waters of a plot is simply a mannerism, in itself not unpleasant.

In *The Longest Journey* the mannerism becomes a most noticeable and therefore very annoying habit, and we have the now notorious string of surprises. We begin in chapter 2, in a conversation between Rickie and his mother on the possibility of his catching cold if he goes out improperly clad:

He was not very often irritable or rude, but he answered, 'Oh, I shan't catch cold. I do wish you wouldn't keep on bothering.'

He did not catch cold, but while he was out his mother died. She only survived her husband eleven days, a coincidence which was recorded on their tombstone (p. 36).

Next there is the opening of chapter 5 'Gerald died that afternoon. He was broken up in the football match' (p. 61). This pattern is followed, albeit much later, in the announcement of the death of Rickie's baby. Rickie is told that the child will

live, but be deformed as he is himself. 'God was more merciful. A window was opened too wide on a draughty day. After a short, painless illness his daughter died' (p. 208). Then there is the death of Rickie's father: 'There was to be no scandal. By the time they arrived Robert had been drowned' (p. 266). Finally (and consistently!) the death of Rickie himself is announced with a similar abruptness.

It is unfair so to tabulate; and it may be that the man who gravely criticizes is breaking a butterfly upon a wheel. But can one possibly defend? Lionel Trilling's attempt to do so (pp. 57-8) seems to me to fail. To compare sudden deaths and such surprises in the novel to a game of chess where 'the value of all the pieces on the board may be changed by the removal of a single piece, the forces shifting and the game entering a new phase' is to say at the same time too little and too much—too little because the defence does not stop Professor Trilling himself from complaining that the reconciliation at the conclusion of *Howards End* is 'rather forced', and too much because if the defence is valid at all it is a defence of all improbability in all fiction. His earlier pronouncement, that 'to accept Forster we have to know [*sic*] that *The Winter's Tale* is dramatically sound and that improbability is the guide to life' certainly begs the question—and will not convince those of us who continue to prefer *Hamlet* and the method of *Hamlet*. The danger of the Forster method is, simply, that it will make the reader laugh; and for Forster's reader to laugh at him can be of no more assistance to the final effect of his novel than can the mirth of an audience at Antigonus ('Exit—pursued by a bear') reinforce the desired impression of *The Winter's Tale*. (I am equally unimpressed by a recent defence of *that* as good dramatic art!)

Peter Burra's defence of Forster's plots as having 'operatic truth'<sup>18</sup> is also, surely, a quibble. What *truth* has the libretto of the average opera? What usually happens in an opera house is that we disregard the story or, it might be better to say, regard the absurdities of the story as the price we pay for the music. Our attitude to the plot of *The Longest Journey*, it seems to me, must be very similar; we try to suspend our disbelief and are willing to do so because we think we thereby gain in the long run. But the story is not therefore good in itself; and it is absurd for Rose Macaulay to claim that it is 'great'.

It is refreshing to find that Forster himself does not attempt

<sup>18</sup> Introduction to *A Passage to India* (Everyman's Library edition), p. xvi.

now to justify the method; he does what is far wiser and laughs at it (and, to be sure, at its critics). This is in his essay on 'The Raison d'Etre of Criticism in the Arts', originally a lecture contributed to a symposium on 'Music and Criticism' at Harvard and now reprinted in *Two Cheers for Democracy*.

I can truly say with Mr. Day Lewis that I have nearly always found criticism irrelevant . . . One can eliminate a particular defect perhaps; to substitute merit is the difficulty. I remember that in one of my earlier novels I was blamed for the number of sudden deaths in it, which were said to amount to forty-four per cent of the fictional population. I took heed, and arranged that characters in subsequent novels should die less frequently and give previous notice where possible by means of illness or some other acceptable device. But I was not inspired to put anything vital in the place of sudden deaths. The only remedy for a defect is inspiration, the subconscious stuff that comes up in the bucket (p. 129).

But if Forster never did put 'anything vital' in place of the sudden deaths and their equivalents—as *A Passage to India* shows—he did certainly give them less and less importance in his plots.

What can be said—and cannot be said too strongly—is what Forster went on to say in this same lecture: such defects may be 'vital to the general conception'. They do not therefore cease to be defects, but it is not necessarily desirable that an alternative method should be substituted. Even though the justice of the particular criticism be admitted, it may well be that any critical suggestion for amelioration should be ignored lest the whole be spoilt.

It is worth noting that Forster's main weakness in story-telling—let us call it string-pulling—is a danger most natural to the omniscient method of narration. Yet that method has its virtues, too, and may indeed be the best possible one if the author's personality is to be an important element in the whole. It is so with Forster; and that is why one must add to the outstanding qualities of these earlier novels (and, of course, of the later two also) what, for want of a better word, must be called style.

Their style is perhaps the quality of these novels that is first noticed; certainly it is the one that is never forgotten. Forster's style is, as we might expect, free from jargon, pure. In the narrow sense, only one criticism has ever been made of it, and Forster tells us of that himself (in the same essay on 'The Raison d'Etre of Criticism in the Arts'):

I have certainly benefited by being advised not to use the word 'but' so often. I have had a university education, you see, and it disposes one to overwork that particular conjunction. It is the strength of the academic mind to be fair and see both sides of a question. It is its weakness to be timid and to suffer from that fear-of-giving-oneself-away disease of which Samuel Butler speaks. Both its strength and its weakness incline it to the immoderate use of 'but'. A good many 'buts' have occurred today, but not as many as if I had not been warned (p. 130).

In the wider and, of course, more important sense, there has also been general appreciation of Forster's 'style'. Trilling says (p. 32) that it sometimes 'becomes arch, whimsical and feminine'—and so it does; but Trilling is fully appreciative of its general effect, an effect of urbane but never stilted conversation. This has been well described by E. B. C. Jones, who speaks particularly of 'the interpolations which break up the dialogue, with an elegant colloquialism of style which prevents them sounding pontifical, even when they express the author's own views'.<sup>19</sup>

Forster's is, in fact, the perfect ironic manner; and it cannot be accidental that so many of the great novelists who have used the omniscient method have been masters of irony. Fielding and Thackeray leap to mind. The irony, no doubt, provides what Lytton Strachey might have called the necessary antiseptic quality—necessary since with this method a reader is instantly aware of his discomfort if the novelist takes himself or his character too seriously. A typical Forster sentence is (from *Where Angels Fear to Tread*): 'The train reached Charing Cross, and they parted—he to go to a matinée, she to buy petticoats for the corpulent poor' (p. 89); and it is quite noticeable that this comes at a point when Caroline has just been re-established in the reader's goodwill by her confession that she blames herself for Lilia's marriage. The reference to 'the corpulent poor' ensures, without obvious intrusion on the author's part, that she shall not be *too* firmly established.

At times it might be thought that Forster goes perilously close to breaking his own rule that the author should never take the reader into his confidence about his characters—as in this paragraph from *Where Angels Fear to Tread*:

She turned away her head when Gino lifted his son to his lips. This was something too remote from the prettiness of

<sup>19</sup> 'E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf', *The English Novelists*, ed. Verschoyle (London, 1936), p. 271.



the nursery. The man was majestic; he was a part of Nature; in no ordinary love scene could he ever be so great. For a wonderful physical tie binds the parents to the children; and—by some sad, strange irony—it does not bind us children to our parents. For if it did, if we could answer their love not with gratitude but with equal love, life would lose much of its pathos and much of its squalor, and we might be wonderfully happy. Gino passionately embracing, Miss Abbott reverently averting her eyes—both of them had parents whom they did not love so very much (pp. 155-6).

But it is clear that he has not really broken it, for—and this is characteristic of him—the particular (here the pair of characters) is seen in the light of the universal, about which he makes his editorial comment. What Forster has to say at such times is always worth listening to and it may well be that it is better worth listening to than it would be if he had his eye firmly on the single character. There is no loss of 'illusion and nobility' and certainly no loss of 'intimacy' either; and the generalizations give the Forster novels their over-all effect of humane and un-pompous wisdom.

It is natural, then, for his style to veer towards the epigram; and not for the world would one part with a single Forster epigram, whether one agrees with it—as one certainly agrees with the one on 'degraded' Cockney repartee (*The Longest Journey*, p. 274) or whether one disagrees—as one notably withholds full assent from

'If I had a girl, I'd keep her in line,' is not the remark of a fool nor of a cad. Rickie had not kept his wife in line. He had shown her all the workings of his soul, mistaking this for love; and in consequence she was the worse woman after two years of marriage . . . (*ibid.* p. 279).

Agreement or disagreement, however, is mostly beside the point (unless, indeed, it be argued that this philosophy is inconsistent with the creed of personal relationships, as perhaps it is); the brilliance of the phrasing attracts as much as does the turn of thought; and of how many English novels could it be said that they combine for us the conversational charm of an essay by Lamb and the ironical tang of a satire by Byron or Pope?

The great writers of conversational or satirical literature, however, are rarely successful at the 'poetic' kind as well; and, with Savage, I do question one quality in Forster's style—what the critic calls the "poetical" vagueness' of some of the passages, notably at crises, for instance when Rickie sees Agnes

in Gerald's embrace.<sup>20</sup> One need not agree that 'this sort of false, overripe writing indicates some basic uncertainty in Forster's grasp of life'; but it is true that such passages will not, in the early novels, bear the weight thrown upon them. This is the great moment of Agnes's life, possibly of Gerald's; and it is because of this incident that we are later asked to alter our whole attitude to him.

What is perhaps even more worthy of note is the way in which this fault, like so many of the others in the first three novels, becomes, as it were, toned down in the later two or even turned to positive account. The virtues—and one cannot always say this of a writer's later, more mature work—all remain.

<sup>20</sup> *The Withered Branch*, p. 51.

## H O W A R D S   E N D

H O W A R D S E N D is exactly the kind of book that, knowing Forster's three earlier novels, we might now have expected him to write. In it the other three are, as it were, included; what they had to say is summarized and developed. Forster writes again of the conflict between two ways of life, and the motto of the book is 'Only connect . . .'—'Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height.'

Ostensibly the novel is the story of two families, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes. The Schlegel family—or rather the two daughters of the family, Margaret and Helen—believe in personal relationships; the Wilcox family—except for the first Mrs Wilcox—do not. A Wilcox is 'the practical person, who knows what he wants at once, and generally knows nothing else' (p. 69), whereas Margaret and Helen Schlegel believe with their creator that 'it is private life that holds out the mirror to infinity; personal intercourse, and that alone, that ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision' (p. 86). In justice to a now largely discredited novelist, it might be noticed in passing that this is not only like the theme of Forster's own earlier novels but also like that of Galsworthy's *The Country House* (1907), for Galsworthy makes a not dissimilar, if less subtle, use of a landed upper-middle-class family, the Pencyces (except, interestingly, Mrs Pencyce) to represent the evils of mere efficiency—intolerance and self-satisfaction being the chief among them.

The most Wilcoxian of all Wilcoxes is the son, Charles—a worse edition of his father. Charles is the kind of man who grants his wife 'all his affection and half his attention' (p. 100). He can see in a Schlegel nothing but a potential enemy; indeed he cannot so much as talk with one (even when that one is Tibby, Margaret and Helen's academic brother) because 'they had nothing in common but the English language, and tried by its help to express what neither of them understood', namely, Helen (p. 326). Charles's understanding is limited to the few emotions he has himself experienced; and so he can think of the father of Helen's illegitimate child only as 'her lover'. He finally suffers because 'the law, being made in his image,

sentenced him to three years' imprisonment' (p. 353) for an action—the attack on Leonard Bast—which had seemed to him to be demanded of his 'honour'. Such a character, a minor one and basically comic, is, according to Forster's theory of the novel, entitled to be flat; and it would certainly be unreasonable to expect more than flatness of a character on whom the author has so little time to spare. Flatness, however, does not necessarily mean complete unreality; and Charles is, as the cliché has it, almost terrifying in his lifelikeness. In him Forster makes a point; but he does not reduce the novel to the level of the theorem in order to do so.

More important, and more subtly treated, is Mr (Henry) Wilcox—clearly seen and magnificently portrayed by Forster, for example in his reflections on his first wife soon after her death:

Without fully explaining, she had died. It was a fault on her part, and—tears rushed into his eyes—what a little fault! It was the only time she had deceived him in those thirty years . . . Ah yes—she had been a good woman—she had been steady. He chose the word deliberately. To him steadiness included all praise (p. 95).

Later, to his future second wife, Henry Wilcox writes that she is to come up to London 'at once'—the words were underlined, as is necessary when dealing with women' (p. 166); and one begins to see that Henry and the Wilcoxes in general also represent at times (Forster does not, I am sure, make the complete equation) the 'masculine' point of view, in the wrong sense of that word, whereas the Schlegels generally take the feminine, if not quite the feminist, one. It is a remarkable achievement on Forster's part to present the latter so convincingly—far more convincingly, I would suggest, than does Virginia Woolf. (Mrs Woolf, one sometimes feels, does not merely present a point of view: she takes sides.)

This aspect of Henry is clearly shown in the scene in which he too kisses his fiancée so oddly (and the progress Forster has made as a novelist will be clear if this passage is now compared with the more farcical one, already quoted, in which Cecil Vyse first kisses Lucy, in *A Room with a View*):

As they were going up by the side-paths, through some rhododendrons, Mr. Wilcox, who was in front, said 'Margaret' rather huskily, turned, dropped his cigar, and took her in his arms.

She was startled, and nearly screamed, but recovered herself

at once, and kissed with genuine love the lips that were pressed against her own. It was their first kiss, and when it was over he saw her safely to the door and rang the bell for her, but disappeared into the night before the maid answered it. On looking back, the incident displeased her . . . If a man cannot lead up to passion he can at all events lead down from it . . . (p. 194).

It is part of Forster's point here that Henry, in words used elsewhere in the novel, 'had always the sneaking belief that bodily passion is bad, a belief that is desirable only when held passionately' (p. 197); and through Henry, Forster seems to state his case more successfully in the negative, as it were, than through Stephen and George Emerson and even Gino he had previously stated it in the positive. The sexual theme is, then, woven through *Howards End*. The Wilcoxes, although they breed prolifically, are incapable of true sexual love; and their attitude to women is very like that attributed to Nazi Germany, with a curious similarity even in phrase:

They would argue so jollily, and once or twice she had him in quite a tight corner, but as soon as he grew really serious, she gave in. Man is for war, woman for the recreation of the warrior, but he does not dislike it if she makes a show of fight. She cannot win in a real battle, having no muscles, only nerves (p. 274).

Not surprisingly, then, Henry is quite unable to forgive a woman's 'indiscretion', and quite unable even to comprehend that it is no different from his own.

It is worth noting that even now Forster cannot always resist the temptation to 'guy' Henry, in the old way. 'Jollily' in the passage just quoted is one small instance. Then, in chapter 17 Henry is seen taking Margaret to lunch:

'What'll you have?'

'Fish pie,' said she, with a glance at the menu.

'Fish pie! Fancy coming for fish pie to Simpson's. It's not a bit the thing to go for here.'

'Go for something for me, then,' said Margaret, pulling off her gloves . . .

'Saddle of mutton,' said he after profound reflection; 'and cider to drink. That's the type of thing. I like this place, for a joke, once in a way. It is so thoroughly Old English. Don't you agree?'

'Yes,' said Margaret, who didn't (pp. 160-1).

It is too bad when only a page or two later the conversation includes:

'Gruyère or Stilton?'

'Gruyère, please.'

'Better have Stilton.'

'Stilton' (p. 163).

But this, though it is broad in its humour, does not constitute a serious fault, in its context, nor is it typical. The important point is that on the whole Forster is no longer content with broad effects. Rose Macaulay even went so far as to say that in *Howards End* 'he has a little shifted his ground. Still two worlds, two ways of thought and life, are at war, but now one is not all truth and light, the other not all sham and darkness: both are bad unless they fuse and co-operate' (p. 99). I do not think that Forster would agree that the Schlegel 'way of thought' is ever 'bad'; but certainly in *Howards End* there is more concession. And here it is not just a matter of seeing that an individual who is on the right side may himself have faults (as Gino has) or that one on the wrong side may have virtues: it is a matter of seeing that there is something to be said for the wrong side as such. So Forster writes of Henry Wilcox that 'Some day—in the millennium—there may be no need for his type. At present, homage is due to it from those who think themselves superior, and who possibly are' (p. 171). And the whole theme of the novel is set out in Margaret's reflections on the Wilcoxes, long before she has put her theory into practice by marrying one of them:

They were not 'her sort', they were often suspicious and stupid, and deficient where she excelled; but collision with them stimulated her, and she felt an interest that verged into liking, even for Charles . . . Once past the rocks of emotion, they knew so well what to do, whom to send for; their hands were on all the ropes, they had grit as well as grittiness, and she valued grit enormously. They led a life that she could not attain to—the outer life of 'telegrams and anger' . . . To Margaret this life was to remain a real force. She could not despise it, as Helen and Tibby affected to do. It fostered such virtues as neatness, decision, and obedience, virtues of the second rank, no doubt, but they have formed our civilization. They form character, too; Margaret could not doubt it: they keep the soul from becoming sloppy. How dare Schlegels despise Wilcoxes, when it takes all sorts to make a world? (p. 109).

One should not, however, mistake Forster's concessions for complete approval. Burra was justifiably amused by D. H. Lawrence's letter to Forster: 'You *did* make a nearly deadly

mistake glorifying those business people in *Howards End*. Business is no good.' But is his own comment above suspicion? '“Wilcoxes” and “Schlegels”,’ he writes, ‘are presented with as exact a balance of sympathy as is possible . . . So that it almost depends on the personal feeling of the reader to incline the scale finally either way.’<sup>1</sup> Any reader whose personal feeling led him to favour the Wilcoxes after the passages already quoted in this chapter had better not read E. M. Forster! Burra, of course, did not really mean what he said; he was exaggerating to make a debating point. But he spoils Forster’s point, which is that, in spite of all its merits, Wilcoxism is inferior.

Between the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels there is indeed an immense gulf. The difference is epigrammatically expressed in Forster’s favourite phrasing: ‘It is impossible to see modern life steadily and see it whole, and she [Margaret] had chosen to see it whole. Mr Wilcox saw steadily’ (pp. 170-1). The characterization of Margaret and Helen Schlegel is thus vital to the success of the book; and at this stage of his development as a novelist, Forster is more than adequate for the task.

Lionel Trilling thought he saw significance in the very names of the two sisters. Henry, he points out, is Faust’s christian name, and Margaret and Helen are the names of the heroines of the two parts of *Faust*, the one the heroine of the practical life, the other of the ideal life. Mr Forster, however, informed Professor Trilling in a letter that he had in mind no association with *Faust* (p. 116). There is a clear contrast between the sisters, but it is not quite of the kind Trilling suggests.

The main quality in Helen which differentiates her from Margaret is not idealism but a certain impetuosity in personal relationships. She ‘was rather apt to entice people, and, in enticing them, to be herself enticed’ (p. 32). In this way she is momentarily attracted to Wilcoxism, in her flirtation with Paul, the younger son. But from this attraction she quickly recovers:

‘I remember Paul at breakfast,’ said Helen quietly. ‘I shall never forget him. He had nothing to fall back upon. I know that personal relations are the real life, for ever and ever.’  
‘Amen!’ (p. 29).

Thereafter, till the very end, Helen will not approve of Wilcoxes; but, of course, she is just as impetuous again in a

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *A Passage to India* (Everyman’s Library edition 1942), p. xxv.

more serious but equally mistaken relationship with the clerk Leonard Bast.

Margaret is steadier—though by no means ‘steady’ in Forster’s own pejorative sense of the word, where steadiness implies unawareness of the whole. Margaret is aware—or, in Forster’s words, ‘not beautiful, not supremely brilliant, but filled with something that took the place of both qualities—something best described as a profound vivacity, a continual and sincere response to all that she encountered in her path through life’ (p. 10). She is, then, a finer, maturer, more sensitive and more sensible Lucy Honeychurch—and is at least as far from being the usual heroine of fiction. Margaret has her faults; she can be ‘excitable in her methods, garrulous, episodic, shrill’ (p. 194) and is therefore quite properly once rebuked by Mrs Wilcox. But she does believe in the inner life, she does try to connect—even to the extent of agreeing to be the second Mrs Wilcox. Helen, learning of this engagement, is incredulous; so too, perhaps, are we. As F. R. Leavis once put it, ‘Nothing in the exhibition of Margaret’s or Henry Wilcox’s character makes the marriage credible or acceptable’. What is worse, Dr Leavis goes on to say, is that Forster needs this marriage to make a point—and it is a point which is not valid. ‘He unintentionally makes his cause look even more desperate than it need: intelligence and sensitiveness such as *Howards End* at its finest represents need not be so frustrated by innocence and inexperience as the unrealities of the book suggest.’<sup>2</sup> It is much the same fault, I think, as has been noticed in the earlier fiction: to *demonstrate*, as it were, that Schlegels need Wilcoxes, Forster has an incident in his plot which is plausible not from what we have already been shown of the characters but only on the assumption that—Schlegels need Wilcoxes. It is this method of making the double assumption, so to speak, that seems to me to lend such force as it has to Mr Montgomery Belgion’s contention that Forster’s values are purely arbitrary.<sup>3</sup> You cannot justify the ways of God to man—the point has been taken against Milton—by assuming that the ways of God are just. There is here the added difficulty—and this, I take it, is Dr Leavis’s argument—that everything that Forster has said previously about Margaret, and even Helen, contradicts the hypothesis that Schlegels need Wilcoxes (except, perhaps, in the economic sense). Nothing in the book demonstrates that Margaret is any better for having become Mrs Wilcox.

<sup>2</sup> *The Common Pursuit*, p. 269.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Diabolism of Mr. E. M. Forster’, *The Criterion*, xiv (1934) 54-73.



At any rate, Margaret does marry Henry and does finally 'tidy up his soul' just a little, so that he and Helen can at least get along together; and thereby, indirectly, Margaret's ability to 'connect' has made possible the survival not only of Helen but also of Helen's—the Schlegel's only—child.

Margaret, one may suggest, is an adequate answer to the criticism that Forster cannot draw a woman character (even if her marriage is improbable). But she is more than that: she is the best reason he has so far given us in his fiction for accepting his philosophy of personal relations.

*Howards End*, however, must, like the earlier novels, have a plot. For plot purposes, another pair of characters is introduced, the clerk Leonard Bast and his wife Jacky. Leonard Bast is first met when Helen, absent-minded because she is so moved by the Beethoven Fifth Symphony, walks out of a concert with his umbrella. The well-meaning Schlegels return the umbrella but quickly forget the incident completely; after all, they 'hear the Fifth practically every time it's done' (p. 122). But acquaintance is renewed when Leonard visits them again to explain why his wife, finding their card, had previously called on them, half thinking to find him there, when he was really out walking all night in search of Nature. Accordingly, when Mr Wilcox announces (wrongly, it proves) that the Insurance company Leonard works for is unsound, they are in a position to try to help, by advising him to leave it. He does leave and joins a bank instead, but is then out of his depth and is dismissed. Helen finds the Basts starving; and believing that the Schlegels and Wilcoxes are responsible, she almost drags the Basts with her to Shropshire, where Margaret is a guest at a Wilcox wedding. But Margaret and Henry do not seem to her to respond adequately to the problem, and she and Leonard are 'stranded for the night in a Shropshire hotel' (p. 247). There, we are asked to believe, Helen and Leonard become, as Charles Wilcox later thinks of it, lovers. Indeed the phrase hardly matters, for we never know in just what spirit the two did come together—which is one reason why we refuse to believe it ever happened. E. B. C. Jones goes so far as to suggest that Forster doesn't really believe it either.<sup>4</sup> Certainly he seems to apologize for the incident when he pauses to say that we know little about such things, and such a statement is always an indication that a novelist is at the end of his tether. It lays him open to the charge that *he* knows nothing at all about such things—and that is practically what Frank Swinnerton does

<sup>4</sup> Verschoyle (ed.), *The English Novelists*, p. 270.

say of the Basts. 'What am I to do,' he asks, 'with two persons, in a class well known to me, who though they are apparently seriously offered as portraits, never say or do a single thing which I find credible?'<sup>5</sup> We are dealing not only with Leonard of whom Forster actually says (equally to Mr Swinnerton's indignation) that 'perhaps the keenest happiness he had ever known was during a railway journey to Cambridge, where a decent-mannered undergraduate had spoken to him' (p. 129) but also with Helen. If Leonard would never have dared, Helen would never have descended.

In the interview with P. N. Furbank and F. J. H. Haskell recorded in *The Paris Review*, Mr Forster was asked 'Have you ever described any type of situation of which you have had no personal knowledge?' and he is said to have replied 'The home-life of Leonard and Jacky in *Howards End* is one case. I knew nothing about that. I believe I brought it off' (p. 33). He went on to say of the 'seduction' of Helen, 'I did it like that out of a wish to have surprises. It has to be a surprise for Margaret, and this was best done by making it a surprise for the reader too. Too much may have been sacrificed to this' (p. 34). The non-sequitur of the penultimate sentence has been met before in Forster's critical comments and need not be discussed again; but it is worth noting that this incident of the 'seduction' is far less easy for a reader to take in his stride than is a mere improbable death. For if one does believe it, it alters one's whole conception of Helen.

At any rate, Helen's pregnancy eventually helps to bring Schlegels and Wilcoxes together. Leonard, in his blundering way, comes to see Margaret, knowing nothing of Helen's presence or of her pregnancy; and Charles Wilcox, who has learnt the identity of Helen's 'lover', strikes him with a sword:

It hurt him, not where it descended, but in the heart. Books fell over him in a shower . . .

They laid Leonard, who was dead, on the gravel; Helen poured water over him.

'That's enough,' said Charles.

'Yes, murder's enough,' said Miss Avery, coming out of the house with the sword (p. 343).

Margaret is able to profit from the consequent loss to the Wilcox morale (the reader tends to think of it in that way,

<sup>5</sup> *The Georgian Literary Scene*, p. 292. Mr. Forster told Angus Wilson that D. H. Lawrence had praised the portrait of Leonard, whom he himself had no intention of condemning ('An Interview with E. M. Forster', *Encounter*, November 1957, pp. 52-7).

though Forster himself does not) by seeing that Helen and her child are allowed to remain at Howards End.

In the story of the Basts there is intended to be, of course, more than mere plot-interest. There is also the usual Forster symbolism. Leonard comes to stand for his class as well; and Trilling points out (p. 111) that he is significantly brought into contact with the Schlegels through his pitiful attempts at culture (he attends the symphony concert apparently only to improve his culture—again to Mr Swinnerton's justifiable indignation), just as the Wilcoxes first met the Schlegels through *their* attempts at culture (they were inspecting a cathedral in Europe). It is in this capacity as a clerk that Leonard is, as Savage says (p. 59), 'falsified' by Forster. Symptomatic of the author's uneasiness, perhaps, are the several passages in which Leonard is explained.

In the first (which I have already quoted in part) he is analysed directly as the victim of a social revolution that has left no place for him:

The boy, Leonard Bast, stood at the extreme verge of gentility . . . He was not as courteous as the average rich man, nor as intelligent, nor as healthy, nor as lovable. His mind and his body had been alike underfed, because he was poor, and because he was modern they were always craving better food. Had he lived some centuries ago, in the brightly coloured civilizations of the past, he would have had a definite status, his rank and his income would have corresponded. But in his day the angel of Democracy had arisen, enshadowing the classes with leathern wings, and proclaiming, 'All men are equal—all men, that is to say, who possess umbrellas,' and so he was obliged to assert gentility, lest he slipped into the abyss where nothing counts, and the statements of Democracy are inaudible (p. 48).

Later he is seen, perhaps more critically, but in much the same way, through the eyes of the Schlegels:

The three hurried downstairs, to find, not the gay dog they expected, but a young man, colourless, toneless, who had already the mournful eyes above a drooping moustache that are so common in London, and that haunt some streets of the city like accusing presences. One guessed him as the third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization had sucked into the town; as one of the thousands who have lost the life of the body and failed to reach the life of the spirit. Hints of robustness survived in him, more than a hint of primitive good looks, and Margaret,

noting the spine that might have been straight, and the chest that might have broadened, wondered whether it paid to give up the glory of the animal for a tail coat and a couple of ideas (pp. 121-2).

But it will be noticed that he *is* explained, and not observed; and when his creator tries to show him to us, we are free to suspect again either a certain ignorance of the Leonard Basts of the world or a misplaced readiness to caricature and make fun of them. (An example would be the passage describing Leonard's attempts to model his style on Ruskin—p. 52.)

In short, Leonard is more satisfying as a symbol than as a character in a novel; and he symbolizes, roughly, the British working class that, deprived of its place on the land, has never quite come to terms with the modern 'civilization' that is offered it instead. It may, then, be part of Forster's point that the coming together of Basts and Schlegels will generally bring sorrow to the Basts—unless there is goodwill of a more active kind than is first shown by, particularly, Helen. He no doubt wishes to suggest also that for the tragedy of the Basts of the world, Wilcoxes are mainly responsible. That, presumably, is the excuse for the second melodramatic improbability of the plot, when Jacky turns out to have been Henry Wilcox's former mistress. Finally, it is a Wilcox who destroys Leonard—by using the wrong side of the ancestral sword and with the assistance of the fall of piles of books (symbolizing the very culture he had so pathetically sought).

Even more vital to the meaning of the novel—and proof that its theme is not only or even primarily social—is the first Mrs Wilcox. Mrs Wilcox is very important to Forster but her function is not therefore easy to explain—a point that will be clear if I quote Rex Warner's not very successful attempt in his statement that after her death she becomes 'a sort of goddess or medicine woman, a representative of female and illogical wisdom' (p. 22). Rather Mrs Wilcox is gifted with a kind of intuitive perception of the truth—so that she knows when people are in love or about to make fools of themselves, without having to be told. She becomes then (like Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India*) a symbol of what E. B. C. Jones has called 'the first hand response to life' (p. 273); and of her he rightly says that like Mrs Moore 'She has no intellectual conception of the conflict or of what the decent attitude is; she lives through her possession of the deeply moral quality of taste, which the intellect is powerless by itself to attain' (p. 274).

As Jones also points out, however, Mrs Wilcox is not

sentimentalized—nor is Mrs. Moore: 'Mrs. Wilcox is limited and socially a bore, and Mrs. Moore is often, from Adela's and Ronnie's point of view, peevish and unsympathetic' (p. 274). This is clearly borne out by chapter 9, the description of Margaret's luncheon party for Mrs Wilcox, a party which, because Mrs Wilcox quite lacks the usual social virtues, is 'not a success'. Forster seems to see such women as being independent of—largely because unaware of—ordinary mundane obligations.<sup>6</sup> They rise above these, in their concern with the essentials of life, much as Yeats's medium in *The Words upon the Window Pane* may be said, when 'possessed' by Swift's spirit, to rise above her intellectual incapacity and her complete ignorance of him. Or in Forster's own words of Mrs Wilcox, 'she and daily life were out of focus: one or the other must show blurred' (p. 80).

In seeking to answer the question whether Mrs Wilcox 'stands for' anything, Trilling points out that her Christian name is Ruth, and 'her heart is sad, the home for which she is sick is her chief passion and she stands amid alien corn'—her family (pp. 103-4). He comes to the conclusion—does it quite follow?—that 'she represents England's past' (p. 105). I think this is nearly, but not quite, correct.

When Margaret and Helen discuss Mrs Wilcox towards the end of the novel, Margaret's understanding goes beyond this:

'I feel that you and I and Henry are only fragments of that woman's mind. She knows everything. She is everything. She is the house, and the tree that leans over it . . . I cannot believe that knowledge such as hers will perish with knowledge such as mine. She knew about realities' (p. 331).

Might it not be said then that Mrs Wilcox has this knowledge—is right—because she is part of a tradition, a way of life? Or perhaps she is the tradition—a tradition which by itself can help people to the truth.<sup>7</sup> This is the point that is made clear when Mrs Wilcox is first met. Charles Wilcox, having just heard from Helen Schlegel's aunt of the temporary

<sup>6</sup> Or possibly he sees these limitations as the price of their virtues. Cf., of Edward Gibbon, 'He never developed his emotions. For this he has been blamed. But if you develop your emotions—for that you have to pay—everything has to be paid for, and he would have impaired the particular qualities that made him great'. (From a wireless talk, 'Edward Gibbon', published in *Talking to India*, ed. Orwell, London, 1943, pp. 11-16.)

<sup>7</sup> Holt (*PMLA*, 1946, p. 816) suggests that here also one may suspect the influence of Samuel Butler: 'Butler, too, believed that true wisdom is handed down from generation to generation by unconscious memory'. But Forster has denied the influence here (See pp. 23-4).

infatuation of Helen and his brother Paul, is trying in Wilcox fashion to get to the 'truth':

'Paul, is there any truth in this?'

'I didn't—I don't ——'

'Yes or no, man; plain question, plain answer. Did or didn't Miss Schlegel ——'

'Charles dear,' said a voice from the garden. 'Charles, dear Charles, one doesn't ask plain questions. There aren't such things.'

They were all silent. It was Mrs Wilcox.

She approached just as Helen's letter had described her, trailing noiselessly over the lawn, and there was actually a wisp of hay in her hands. She seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it. One knew that she worshipped the past, and that the instinctive wisdom the past can alone bestow had descended upon her—that wisdom to which we give the clumsy name of aristocracy. High born she might not be. But assuredly she cared about her ancestors, and let them help her. When she saw Charles angry, Paul frightened, and Mrs Munt in tears, she heard her ancestors say, 'Separate those human beings who will hurt each other most. The rest can wait' (pp. 22-3).

It is because Mrs Wilcox represents not the past only, but a continuing tradition, that Margaret can replace her and become in every sense the second Mrs Wilcox. The old, seemingly half-witted family servant, Miss Avery, therefore actually identifies them: to her—and to posterity—the difference between them is completely unimportant, in fact irrelevant.

Mrs Wilcox, then, bequeaths her house, Howards End, to Margaret. The Wilcoxes, seeing in this all they can see, a temporary aberration, conceal the bequest. Nevertheless, in the long run, because of her marriage to Henry Wilcox, Margaret comes to live at Howards End—as Miss Avery told her she would; Henry bequeaths it alone, of all the Wilcox possessions, to her; and Margaret in turn announces that she will leave it in her will to the child of Helen and Leonard Bast.

Trilling sees the house Howards End here as the symbol of England, which shall be inherited by the *classless* child of Helen and Leonard. The identification is tempting but perhaps to be resisted, particularly as Helen and Margaret are half German (although that, too, could have its point, I suppose, as indicating the real nature of the English heritage). The more important meaning, at any rate, would seem to be different.

The male Wilcoxes are never happy at Howards End; and

Mr Wilcox has never even heard of the country superstition that toothache can be cured by eating the bark of the elm into which pigs' teeth were stuck long ago. But Mrs Wilcox tells Margaret of these very early in the story, and Margaret admits to a love of 'folklore and all festering superstitions' (p. 75). The wych-elm and the pigs' teeth also, then, have significance. The tree, Forster told his interviewers, 'was the genius of the house'<sup>8</sup>; and the teeth may be said to represent a long continued and a continuing way of life. And it is, one might say (remembering the symbolic value of London in *A Room with a View*), essentially an un-London way of life. Significant, then, is Margaret's desire for the country:

Marriage had not saved her from the sense of flux. London was but a foretaste of this nomadic civilization which is altering human nature so profoundly, and throws upon personal relations a stress greater than they have ever borne before. Under cosmopolitanism, if it comes, we shall receive no help from the earth. Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle, and the binding force that they once exercised on character must be entrusted to Love alone. May Love be equal to the task! (p. 275).

But the London way of life, so fatal to personal relationships, is steadily encroaching, and the red dust of London civilization can be seen even from Howards End.<sup>9</sup> The Wilcoxes would rather have it that way; they can leave Howards End as they have left Oniton—'They have swept into the valley and swept out of it, leaving a little dust and a little money behind' (p. 264). 'The feudal ownership of land,' the author reflects, 'did bring dignity, whereas the modern ownership of movables is reducing us again to a nomadic horde. We are reverting to the civilization of luggage, and historians of the future will note how the middle classes accreted possessions without taking root in the earth, and may find in this the secret of their imaginative poverty' (p. 158). For this 'nomadic' civilization Mrs Wilcox and Margaret have no taste; and the true continuity of the race (however indirectly) is through them. The symbol that therefore comes to be attached to them—it is the opposite of the London 'nomadic' symbolism—is hay. When Mrs Wilcox is first heard of (in chapter 1) 'she came back with her hands full of the hay that was cut yesterday' and when she is first met 'there was actually a wisp of hay in her hands'. The child of Helen and

<sup>8</sup> *The Paris Review*, I. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Compare the account of the encroachment of London on Battersea Rise, in *Marianne Thornton*.

Leonard, bred at Howards End and therefore, like Mrs Wilcox, an essential part of it, plays happily in the hay. The book ends with Helen's words as she returns to the house holding Tom, a country child, by one hand and carrying her baby in the other.

There were shouts of infectious joy.

'The field's cut!' Helen cried excitedly—'the big meadow! We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never!'

She has appropriately used the country way of talking; the hay harvest is unparalleled; 'the inner life had paid'. But the Wilcoxes always got hay-fever<sup>10</sup>.

It needs to be said again that Forster does not use symbolism in the sense in which *Howards End* would mean a way of life (and more) *rather than* a house. The story can, always, be taken on the literal plane; and it is no surprise to learn from *Marianne Thornton* (p. 269) that the house is drawn from the beloved Hertfordshire home of the author's own childhood: 'The garden, the overhanging wych-elm, the sloping meadow, the great view to the west, the cliff of fir trees to the north, the adjacent farm through the high tangled hedge of wild roses were all utilised by me in *Howards End*, and the interior is in the novel too.'

But the suggestions of secondary meanings—and there are others—add a remarkable depth and complexity. Without them the novel can be read happily, except in the few instances when symbolism and fact do not quite match. It may well be that symbolism and fact never do *quite* match (even the composition of the crew of Melville's *Pequod* is determined by non-realistic principles); perhaps the combination is, in the long run, unworkable (if by 'workable' one means perfect correspondence) except, of course, in allegory. The penalty of allegory is that it generally falsifies by its very simplicity—and the simplicity is often not only in the story but also in the values which are being expressed. From this over-simplification *Howards End*

<sup>10</sup> E. K. Brown (*Rhythm in the Novel*, Toronto, 1950, pp. 46-52), also analyses the 'hay' symbolism. He would connect with it three other incidents in the novel: when Margaret, first visiting Howards End, idly gathers 'some weeds that have pushed up between the flags'; when, discovering Henry's past with Jacky and reflecting on Mrs Wilcox, 'She bends over a mower and lets grass trickle through her fingers'; and, thirdly, while she is quarrelling with Henry over Helen, her 'fingers drive unconsciously through the grass, and at the height of the conversation she seems to feel the Six Hills stirring'. I think we should accept this: the weeds in Margaret's hand certainly make easier Miss Avery's 'identification' of her with Mrs Wilcox.



is free; it works, one might say, in the opposite direction, the direction of what Forster himself has called 'expansion'. The method was well analysed and described by E. K. Brown in his *Rhythm in the Novel*, when he wrote:

The expanding symbol is a device . . . appropriate for rendering an emotion, an idea, that by its largeness or its subtlety cannot become wholly explicit. The fixed symbol is almost entirely repetition; the expanding symbol is repetition balanced by variation, and that variation is in progressively deepening disclosure. By the slow uneven way in which it accretes meaning from the succession of contexts in which it occurs; by the mysterious life of its own it takes on and supports; by the part of its meaning that even on the last page of the novel it appears still to withhold—the expanding symbol responds to the impulses of the novelist who is aware that he cannot give us the core of his meaning, but strains to reveal now this aspect of it, now that aspect, in a sequence of sudden flashes (pp. 56-7).

For such effects of expansion an occasional crack in the plot is, after all, not so very great a price to pay.

It should be added that there is another kind of symbolism in *Howards End*—the kind in which the part stands for the whole. The most interesting example is in the account of the concert at which the Schlegels and Leonard Bast hear the Beethoven Fifth Symphony. (Music is Forster's favourite art and his interest in it, so clear in many of the essays in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, took a new turn in his co-operation with Eric Crozier to write the libretto for Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, based, of course, on the story by Herman Melville.<sup>11</sup>)

The chapter (chapter 5) begins light-heartedly enough with the now famous 'It will be generally admitted that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man'. But gradually, although this tone is sustained, one becomes aware that more is involved.

'Look out for the part where you think you have done with the goblins and they come back,' breathed Helen, as the music started with a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end. Others followed him. They were not aggressive creatures; it was that that made them so terrible to Helen. They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world. After the inter-

<sup>11</sup> Published by Boosey and Hawkes, 1951. An essay which now has an added interest for Forster readers is that on 'George Crabbe and Peter Grimes'—originally a lecture given at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1948, and including comments on the libretto of this earlier Britten opera.

lude of elephants dancing, they returned and made the observation for the second time. Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right . . .

Beethoven chose to make all right in the end . . . He blew with his mouth for the second time, and again the goblins were scattered. He brought back the gusts of splendour, the heroism, the youth, the magnificence of life and of death, and, amid vast roarings of a superhuman joy, he led his Fifth Symphony to its conclusion. But the goblins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely, and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things (pp. 34-6).

The goblins constitute in effect Forster's recognition of the presence and power of evil in the world, and the recognition is none the less moving for being transferred, in part at least, to Helen, who in this respect is perhaps a sounder judge than is her sister. Here, then, we have the announcement almost in musical fashion of another of the themes that will lend complexity to the novel.

The concert passages make clear one other of the novel's merits—its astonishing richness in minor characters. One is Mrs Munt 'who collected new ideas as a squirrel collects nuts, and was especially attracted by those that are portable' (p. 63). She is perhaps most memorable in the scene immediately after the concert, 'getting into difficulties with her nephew': 'I do in a way remember the passage, Tibby . . .'

Tibby, himself, too, is handled with Forster's surest and lightest touch. E. K. Brown unfairly called him 'a disciple of Cecil Vyse' (p. 54)—apparently on the evidence of Tibby's approval of a 'Mr Vyse' in chapter 13—and Lord David Cecil even suggests that 'self-sufficient intellectual persons like Tibby in *Howard's* [*sic*] *End* strike him [Forster] as repulsively hard and cold' (p. 182). Forster expressly says otherwise: 'Tibby, for all his defects, had a genuine personality' (p. 117); and from that personality, which has enough of the Schlegel in it to be essentially likeable, Forster gets considerable fun. So do we—and wish that another undergraduate, Ansell, had been portrayed with an affectionate irony similar to that which comes through not only in the account of Tibby at the concert but also in the parody of the Vergilian epic style at the end of even this serious description:

Tibby neither wished to strengthen the position of the rich nor to improve that of the poor, and so was well content to

watch the elms nodding behind the mildly embattled parapets of Magdalen. There are worse lives . . . He had done well in Mods, much to the surprise of those who attended lectures and took proper exercise, and was now glancing disdainfully at Chinese in case he should some day consent to qualify as a Student Interpreter. To him thus employed Helen entered (p. 264-5).

And Tibby, it is interesting to notice, gets *his* hay-fever, far more sympathetically, in London.

The over-dressed Jacky may be slightly overdrawn (the author's voice unnecessarily becomes louder as he talks about her); but Dolly, the model of maternal foolishness, is, as Rose Macaulay rightly pointed out, never out of character. The solemn German cousin Frieda, so amusing because of her very lack of humour, is also 'flat' without being a caricature. (It is worth noting that even such a minor character as Frieda has her part in the symbolism, as a German. Margaret Schlegel's father, a German, had once said that the English 'use the intellect, but you no longer care about it. That I call stupidity'. The definition is an abbreviated, and improved, version of that given in chapter 17 of *The Longest Journey*;<sup>12</sup> and the national contrast implied is similarly modified as compared with those in the first three novels. The Schlegels, coming from an earlier generation of Germans, inherit this care for the intellect; Frieda, the modern German, inherits only 'patriotism' and 'that interest in the universal which the average Teuton possesses and the average Englishman does not'—p. 180.)

Finally, there is one other 'character' in the novel who will be remembered by all who read it—the author, with his 'gay and airy shorthand' ranging now perhaps even more widely, from the light but pointed irony of the single sentence—'the train came to a standstill in a tangle that was almost a town' (p. 15)—through the longer, light but more serious version of the average wedding (pp. 186-7), to the little sermon on the 'gutter press' of the private emotions (in chapter 7). All these comments, it will be noticed, are connected with the main themes of the novel; nor is it surprising that many of the memorable editorial comments are on the subject of the relations between the sexes. One in particular—very much in the vein of Katherine Mansfield, it seems to me—shows just how far Forster is from being a feminist, in spite of all his sympathy with the Schlegel sisters:

The barrier of sex, though decreasing among the civilized,

<sup>12</sup> See page 23.

is still high, and higher on the side of women. Helen could tell her sister all, and her cousin much about Paul; she told her brother nothing. It was not prudishness, for she now spoke of 'the Wilcox ideal' with laughter, and even with a growing brutality. Nor was it precaution, for Tibby seldom repeated any news that did not concern himself. It was rather the feeling that she betrayed a secret into the camp of men, and that, however trivial it was on this side of the barrier, it would become important on that. So she stopped, or rather began to fool on other subjects, until her long-suffering relatives drove her upstairs. Fräulein Mosebach followed her, but lingered to say heavily over the banisters to Margaret, 'It is all right—she does not love the young man—he has not been worthy of her.'

'Yes, I know; thanks very much.'

'I thought I did right to tell you.'

'Ever so many thanks.'

'What's that?' asked Tibby. No one told him, and he proceeded into the dining-room, to eat Elvas plums (p. 69).

The passage is a model of how editorial comment can be woven into the fabric of a novel.

Few will dispute, I think, that all this adds up to an extraordinary amount (both of meaning and of what I shall call for want of a better phrase, literary pleasure) to fit within the pages of a short novel. With all due respect to Dr Leavis, one must prefer it to the earlier works. Lionel Trilling and others would go still further and call it 'undoubtedly Forster's masterpiece' (p. 99). But, fine as *Howards End* is, Forster's masterpiece, as I shall hope to show, is *A Passage to India*.

## A PASSAGE TO INDIA

FORSTER'S LAST, and to my mind finest, novel was published in 1924, and was based on the first two visits he made to India, in 1912-13 and 1921. (It was begun before 1921 and resumed after he returned to England.) Rose Macaulay would have it (p. 176) that there is consequently some mixing of periods and that Forster's portrait of India is true neither of 1912-13 nor of 1921. It may be so, although full evidence has not been produced: Forster himself, in his Author's Note to the Everyman's Library edition, refers to 'errors in fact, which must be plentiful, especially in chapter 24' (the court scene) and 'anachronisms, such as my uses of "Lieutenant-Governor" and of "Anglo-Indian"' (p. xxxi). Nevertheless, whatever confusion there may be in minor detail, the authenticity of the book need hardly be questioned (nor is the question, in the long run, important). The evidence for authenticity is to be found both in *The Hill of Devi* (built up from letters and diaries actually written in India) and in *Abinger Harvest*, where the group of essays entitled 'The East' contains many incidents and observations on which Forster based parts of the novel. One may now also see in the book, in addition to truthfulness to the past facts about India, a prophetic quality: in view of the progress of India to nationhood during and after the second World War, many of the remarks made in the novel, such as Aziz's 'until England is in difficulties we keep silent, but in the next European war—aha, aha! Then is our time,' bear, as it were, a double edge. The novel gains rather than loses because it is 'out of date'.

Forster's title, as he himself has told us, was taken from Whitman's poem *Passage to India*; and it should be noted how appropriate that title is. Whitman, celebrating further triumphs of civilization in the opening of the Suez Canal and the spanning of America by rail, writes of the need to combine with these material successes of Western civilization a new passage or voyage of the soul into those unexplained areas which are to the soul what India was to the early explorers like Vasco da Gama:

Passage O Soul to India!

Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.

Not you alone proud truths of the world,  
 Nor you alone ye facts of modern science,  
 But myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables,  
 The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,  
 The deep diving bibles and legends,  
 The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions . . .

And in this quest for ultimates—'Passage indeed O soul to primal thought'—he is prepared to risk the vessel of reason itself:

Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking  
 like mere brutes?  
 Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long  
 enough?  
 Sail forth—steer for the deep waters only,  
 Reckless O Soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,  
 For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,  
 And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all . . .

though he would hope for 'the lands to be welded together'. It is a similar theme that Forster sets out to treat in his novel.<sup>1</sup>

In *Howards End*, he had written: 'There are moments when the inner life actually "pays", when years of self-scrutiny, conducted for no ulterior motive, are suddenly of practical use. Such moments are still rare in the West' (p. 206). In the East, presumably, they are frequent. Again, in the essay on Jodhpur in *Abinger Harvest*, Forster writes of one place in India in which 'the "racial question" had been solved' and Englishmen and Indians shared the one club. 'It was as if each race had made concessions. Ours seemed more sensitive than usual, the Indian more solid' (p. 304).

It is to be expected, then, that in *A Passage to India* the position of the Schlegels, with their advocacy of the 'inner life', of sensitivity and of personal relationships, and their willingness to face the unknown, will be taken by the Indians; while Wilcoxism, the life of telegrams and anger, of intolerance, self-satisfaction, fact and solidity, will be represented by the English in India. The expectation that the later novel will be even less like a theorem than *Howards End* is also fulfilled; and there are many intermediate characters, including the 'heroine', Adela Quested, who belong to neither side.

Just as Wilcoxism was seen in its most pernicious form not

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Maclean once suggested that Forster derived from the Whitman poem the structure of his novel. I do not think this is correct and hope that my chapter will show why. His interesting article is in *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXII. 2 (January 1953), pp. 157-71.

in the father but in the son, so Anglo-Indianism (if one may call it that and it seems best to retain the term, however outmoded) is at its worst in the younger officials, notably the young City Magistrate, Ronny Heaslop. In Ronny, Forster achieves one of his finest portraits. 'The only link he could be conscious of with an Indian was the official . . . as private individuals he forgot them' (p. 81). He is in India to do something 'more important' than be pleasant; he is content to obey and be obeyed, and accordingly thinks of the local administrator or 'Collector', Turton, as 'The Great Man'. After years of work in India, Ronny can still write to his brother-in-law, Fielding, that 'the longer one lives here, the more certain one gets that everything hangs together. My personal opinion is, it's the Jews' (pp. 320-1); and this lack of real intelligence is typical. 'Callow' is Forster's adjective for him and is the word one seems to remember: 'It was the qualified bray of the callow official, the "I am not perfect but —" that got on her [Adela's] nerves' (p. 85). Such a man is simply incapable of religious feeling, although he thinks he is religious; he 'approved of religion as long as it endorsed the National Anthem, but he objected when it attempted to influence his life' (p. 55). He is also incapable of the finer shades of sympathy; and after his fiancée Adela has had her shattering experience in the Marabar Caves, Ronny is delighted to play the martyr and allow Adela to comfort him.

Forster refuses, of course, to see Ronny as entirely bad, and notably makes some attempt to redeem him in the matter of his proposed engagement to Adela. Early in the novel, Adela has her doubts about the marriage and tells Ronny so.

He controlled himself and said gently, 'You never said we should marry, my dear girl; you never bound either yourself or me—don't let this upset you'.

She felt ashamed. How decent he was! He might force his opinions down her throat, but did not press her to an 'engagement', because he believed, like herself, in the sanctity of personal relationships: it was this that had drawn them together at their first meeting, which had occurred among the grand scenery of the English Lakes (p. 88).

This is one of two or three occasions in the book when the phrase 'personal relationships' could perhaps have been avoided: certainly here the phrase is rather misleading. (Another instance is in Adela's conversation with Ronny in chapter 22.) But the point is, no doubt, that whether Ronny believes in personal relationships with Adela or whether she merely thinks he does,

he clearly does not believe in personal relationships with Indians.

Ronny in India is therefore more dangerous than is a Wilcox in England. Different races are now involved, and therefore different scales of values; and it soon becomes certain that there can be no simple contrast here between those who are right and those who are wrong.

Ronny has his redeeming features; and his 'opposite', Dr Aziz, the Indian, who does believe in personal relationships and would, given the chance, be an Englishman's friend, is, correspondingly, far from perfect. He is the kind of man who overacts his part.

Aziz was provocative. Everything he said had an impertinent flavour or jarred. His wings were failing, but he refused to fall without a struggle. He did not mean to be impertinent to Mr. Heaslop, who had never done him harm, but here was an Anglo-Indian who must become a man before comfort could be regained. He did not mean to be greasily confidential to Miss Quested, only to enlist her support; nor to be loud and jolly towards Professor Godbole . . . (p. 81).

But he is all of these things: he is, in Forster's word, flamboyant.

Aziz, flamboyant, was patronizing Mrs. Moore.

'He isn't a bounder,' protested Fielding. 'His nerves are on edge, that's all.'

'What should have upset his precious nerves?'

'I don't know. He was all right when I left.'

'Well, it's nothing I've said,' said Ronny reassuringly. 'I never even spoke to him' (p. 82).

Aziz is sensitive but he is also sensual and sentimental ('he always held pathos to be profound'—p. 22); he is not exactly sensible. Certainly he is impractical; being warned by his friends that he must 'take every precaution against unpunctuality' in his expedition to the Marabar Caves, 'he spent the previous night at the station. The servants were huddled on the platform, enjoined not to stray' (p. 134). And having been warned 'that English people never stop eating, and that he had better nourish them every two hours until a solid meal was ready' (p. 148), he puts the theory into very solid practice. Similarly,

Like most Orientals, Aziz overrated hospitality, mistaking it for intimacy, and not seeing that it is tainted with the sense of possession. It was only when Mrs. Moore or Fielding was near him that he saw further, and knew that it is more blessed to receive than to give (p. 149).



(If, as an Australian, I dispute Forster's opinion of hospitality, it is not to prove him 'wrong' but to make the point that editorial intrusion, when the intrusion is with an ethical comment that can justifiably be questioned, is not the soundest method of establishing character. Forster does not rely on it in *A Passage to India*.)

Aziz is also (like Helen Schlegel) impetuous; he unnecessarily makes an enemy of a nervous countryman, Dr Panna Lal, by galloping his horse too close to the other's carriage. In time of crisis, after his arrest for the alleged assault on Adela, he collapses; and, after the crisis, he becomes, for a time at least, merely hard.

Yet Aziz is fundamentally kind-hearted and the heart is more important to him than intellectual virtues. In this, as in much else, in spite of the difference in their religions, he may be compared with the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior, of whom Forster has written that 'affection . . . was the only force to which [he] responded. It did not always work but without it nothing worked. Affection and its attendants of human warmth and instinctive courtesy—when they were present his heart awoke and dictated his actions. In their absence he could be shifty and cunning although he was never cruel'<sup>2</sup> So, when Aziz's other visitors are criticizing the boy Rafi for a typical Oriental overstatement of an illness, Aziz, in the midst of his confusion over the state of his house, nevertheless 'thought only of the insignificant Rafi, whom he had laughed at, and allowed to be teased. The boy must be sent away happy, or hospitality would have failed, along the whole line' (p. 115). Aziz is, too, the kind of man who, when a friend (Fielding) cannot find his back collar-stud, tears out his own. Accordingly, he is later criticized for untidiness by Ronny.

'I was only thinking how the worthy doctor's collar climbed up his neck.'

'I thought you were discussing the caves.'

'So I am. Aziz was exquisitely dressed, from tie-pin to spats, but he had forgotten his back collar-stud, and there you have the Indian all over: inattention to detail; the fundamental slackness that reveals the race' (p. 86).

The collar-stud thus becomes a symbol of English misunderstanding of Indians; and when a few pages later Ronny is assuring Adela that Indians are all incredible, even the best of them—'“They're all—they all forget their back collar-studs

sooner or later" ' (p. 101)—one realizes that Forster is achieving a double irony by using irony, as it were, as an element in the construction of his novel.

Aziz, one may confidently assert, is a magnificent portrait: as Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson put it, in a letter Forster quotes in his biography (p. 215), 'Aziz I think a triumph—so aliye, and so consistently inconsistent'.

On the question of Indian inconsistency and unreliability, it is interesting to compare from *The Hill of Devi* the whole amusing but sympathetic account of Dewas State—'which can have no parallel, except in a Gilbert and Sullivan opera' (p. 19)—and from *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson*, the revealing sentence: 'the Maharajah offered Dickinson his palace of Mau for ever, forgetting that he had given it to me only two days before' (p. 139). Nor, apparently, has there been any great change in thirty or forty years. Don Salvador de Madariaga, writing on 'The Indian Nation and its Leader' in *The Manchester Guardian Weekly* on 12 July, 1951, draws a picture of the country curiously similar to Forster's:

A visitor goes to India for 21 days, and asks for a visa accordingly, providing all his dates and data required. He must enter by air at Delhi and leave by sea at Bombay. He is given a visa for fifteen days, seven days too short, and in Delhi airfield he is granted a permit to travel from Delhi to Calcutta. What is he to do? Nothing. For, though this strict limitation of his permit to one single trip to a city he does not intend to visit is, in theory, as tyrannical as anything to be met anywhere outside the Soviet world, it turns out to be harmless, since no one controls it . . . There hovers around every decision or arrangement a cloud of uncertainty; only until the last moment one is never sure whether what has been agreed upon will work or will break.

It is because of this typical Indian impracticality and inconsistency, then, and also the flamboyancy, that no Englishman can understand Aziz completely or form with him the perfect personal relationship—not even the schoolteacher, Fielding. Fielding (one of the few characters in Forster who is never, I think, seen as comic)<sup>3</sup> is quite different from the usual Anglo-Indian. In a crisis he keeps his head; at the time of the arrest of Aziz, Fielding alone of the English takes his side. In fact, having found Indians and Englishwomen incompatible in India, Fielding has consciously chosen the former. Moreover—and it

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Maclean would disagree with this, since he writes that Fielding 'is clearly at times an object of ridicule' (*op. cit.* p. 167).

is a point not always noticed by commentators on the novel—Fielding is capable of more than the usual restricted English intellect, and once at least approaches a different, Oriental, kind of vision.

And, fatigued by the merciless and enormous day, he lost his usual sane view of human intercourse, and felt that we exist not in ourselves, but in terms of each others' minds—a notion for which logic offers no support and which had attacked him only once before, the evening after the catastrophe, when from the verandah of the club he saw the fists and fingers of the Marabar swell until they included the whole night sky (p. 259).

Yet even after Adela has withdrawn her charge against Aziz and even when Fielding and Aziz meet months later—not in British India, but significantly (as Lord David Cecil points out<sup>4</sup>) 'in a native state where Indian and English are not pitted one against the other'—it is impossible for them to 'connect'. They discuss the future of India, and Aziz proudly proclaims that she will some day be a nation, and that when the English have been driven out, he and Fielding can be friends:

'Why can't we be friends now?' said the other, holding him affectionately. 'It's what I want. It's what you want.' But the horses didn't want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there'.

This beautifully written passage, I have always felt, is just a little like a Q.E.D.; but at least it clinches the point that Forster has throughout been concerned to make. Personal relationships are nearly impossible between Indians and English. 'A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry' (p. 285); and the linguistic problem is only part of the whole.

In India, then, mere good intentions are not enough, and the English are not altogether to blame for the failure to connect. They are officials; and as Forster has expressly put it in *Abinger Harvest* (in the essay on Wilfred Blunt), 'as soon as one is enclosed in a capacity one's last chance of being attractive to the Oriental disappears' (p. 277). Or, in the words

of *A Passage to India* itself, 'where there is officialism every human relationship suffers' (p. 220); and 'every human act in the East is tainted with officialism' (p. 196).

The English in India *do* some good, but they *are* nearly always wrong, largely because of their approach, which Forster identifies as 'the Public School attitude, flourishing more vigorously than it can yet hope to do in England' (p. 43), acute Sawstonism. They refuse even to learn to speak accurately the language of the Indians. In this, as in much else, the worst offenders are the officials' wives, like Mrs Turton, who 'had learnt the lingo, but only to speak to her servants, so she knew none of the politer forms and of the verbs only the imperative mood' (p. 45). At their worst, they form a mere herd, notable mainly for their stupidity. After Aziz's arrest, they rifle his belongings and think it is evidence against him that he has planned to visit a brothel in Calcutta; and at a time when an appearance of impartiality is essential if they are to win the moral victory at the trial of Aziz, they are ridiculous enough to take charge of the courtroom. They have already provided against any repetition of the incident in the Marabar Caves: 'in the future they were to be numbered in sequence with white paint' (p. 208).

Forster's comic genius is seen at its finest in such presentations of the 'racial problem' in India—including the ever memorable 'Bridge' Party. He has inevitably been accused of caricaturing the English—a charge which is, I think, rebutted by the concessions he makes and his recognition of their difficulties. Nor does he rely on the comic presentation of the problem to gain our assent; he sometimes presents that problem without a smile and even discusses it in his own person.

Perhaps the central or 'core' chapter of the book is chapter 5, in which Ronny and his mother, Mrs Moore, discuss the Indians. She is startled by his confident assertion that pleasant behaviour to Indians is a side-issue, and challenges him on it. He repeats that 'We're out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them's my sentiments. India isn't a drawing room . . . We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do.' And the author comments in person:

He spoke sincerely. Every day he worked hard in the court trying to decide which of two untrue accounts was the less untrue, trying to dispense justice fearlessly . . . It was his duty. But he did expect sympathy from his own people, and except from newcomers, he obtained it . . .

He spoke sincerely, but she could have wished with less gusto . . . He reminded her of his public-school days . . . His words without his voice might have impressed her, but when she heard the self-satisfied lilt of them, when she saw the mouth moving so complacently and competently beneath the little red nose, she felt, quite illogically, that this was not the last word on India. One touch of regret—not the canny substitute but the true regret from the heart—would have made him a different man, and the British Empire a different institution.

'I'm going to argue, and indeed dictate,' she said, clinking her rings. 'The English *are* out here to be pleasant' (pp. 53-4).

In spite of various criticisms of Forster for his omissions, one may feel that in all this there is perception of exceptional acuteness and that even if the main theme of the novel is not *only* the country, the book does more than any other to bring one face to face with the realities of Anglo-India.

There is considerable difference of critical opinion on the question whether Forster is writing in this novel of India, specifically, or of the general problem of human relationships in the world as a whole. James McConkey takes the second view, and writes that 'India is more than a foreign land which the English may leave at their wish: it is the contemporary condition, the separation between all mankind and all earth'.<sup>5</sup> I incline rather to the view that India is a very special case, important to Forster precisely because the general problem is there met in an unusually acute form.

*A Passage to India* is, in any case, a novel; and as such, it needs, again, a plot. Accordingly, Forster has devised the famous incident of the Marabar Caves; and it is fascinating to see how he handles it.

Aziz arranges an expedition to the Marabar Caves, to entertain Mrs Moore and Adela Quested and help them to 'see India'. Fielding and the Brahman, Professor Godbole, who have also been invited, to give the party dignity and 'solidity', miss the train (such things are always happening in India) and Aziz has to take charge alone. So he leads Mrs Moore and Adela into the first cave. Servants and villagers crowd in after them, and Mrs Moore feels faint and is terrified:

She lost Aziz and Adela in the dark, didn't know who touched her, couldn't breathe, and some vile naked thing struck her face and settled on her mouth like a pad . . . For an instant she went mad, hitting and gasping like a fanatic. For not only

did the crush and stench alarm her: there was also a terrifying echo (p. 154).

The 'naked pad', it appears, was only 'a poor little baby, astride its mother's hip'. But Mrs Moore prefers not to continue with the exploration and suggests that Aziz and Adela go on and take only one guide, to avoid a repetition of the crush.

They inspect a few isolated caves and approach the main group; and Adela, whose mind is running on her own approaching marriage to Ronny, suddenly asks Aziz, 'in her honest, decent, inquisitive way', 'Have you one wife or more than one?'

The question shocked the young man very much . . . He was in trouble how to conceal his confusion. 'One, one in my own particular case,' he spluttered, and let go of her hand. Quite a number of caves were at the top of the track, and thinking, 'Damn the English even at their best,' he plunged into one of them to recover his balance. She followed at her leisure, quite unconscious that she had said the wrong thing, and not seeing him, she also went into a cave, thinking with half her mind 'sight-seeing bores me,' and wondering with the other half about marriage (p. 160).

Aziz stays inside his cave 'a minute' and cannot see Adela when he emerges. The guide tells him she has gone into 'a' cave but they shout in vain to attract her attention. Aziz strikes the guide 'for a punishment' and 'the man fled'. Aziz tries to go into every cave himself 'but he never knew where he had started,' they are so alike. Then he sees Adela far down the hillside, going to meet an acquaintance, Miss Derek, who has driven out with Fielding. Aziz 'was so relieved' that he did not think Adela's conduct odd.

He started back alone towards his camp, and almost at once caught sight of something which would have disquieted him very much a moment before: Miss Quested's field-glasses. They were lying at the verge of a cave, half-way down an entrance tunnel. He tried to hang them over his shoulder, but the leather strap had broken, so he put them into his pocket instead. When he had gone a few steps, he thought she might have dropped something else, so he went back to look. But the previous difficulty recurred: he couldn't identify the cave. Down in the plain he heard the car starting; however, he couldn't catch a second glimpse of that. So he scrambled down the valley-face of the hill towards Mrs. Moore, and here he was more successful; the colour and confusion of his little camp soon appeared, and in the midst of it he saw an

Englishman's topi, and beneath it—oh joy!—smiled not Mr. Heaslop, but Fielding (p. 162).

Aziz in his usual way then gives Fielding and Mrs Moore an inaccurate and misleading account of what has occurred.

When he returns to Chandrapore, Aziz is arrested; for Adela believes that she has been accosted in a cave by somebody from whom she has pulled away in terror. 'She hit at him with her field-glasses; he pulled at them and the strap broke, and that is how she got away' (p. 174). The field-glasses, of course, are in Aziz's pocket and he has already 'lied' about what happened.

We shall not complain of this, as of the 'seduction' in *Howards End*, that it is introduced too casually, is not properly prepared for and is inconsistent with all that has gone before. The novelist has been preparing for the Caves incident from the start of the book, and, in particular, everything he has said about the Indian character is relevant. The Caves, themselves, have also been carefully described at the beginning of Part 11, even measurements being given, quietly.

We have been told that Aziz has explained to his 'major domo', Mohammed Latif, that 'he might be playing one or two practical jokes at the caves' (p. 136); and we know that Aziz has never been to the caves before and is ignorant of what is in them. All this, and much more. If, then, we do not believe a word of it, it is not because the incident is casual but because, even on a first reading, we can see that it is engineered. I have heard it maintained that there is pleasure to be had from watching the strings pulled; but this will not do. Seeing a stage hand shift the stage properties may not, in a production that does not aim at realism, detract from one's enjoyment: the sight cannot add to that enjoyment. And Forster is, only too clearly, desperately anxious for us to accept the Marabar Caves incident as a fact—a 'fact' of the same kind as is dealt with elsewhere in the book.

There is this to be said. Forster did not want to show Indians and Anglo-Indians dividing over the serious kind of situation that might well divide any races. He wanted to suggest that it is precisely over just such wellnigh incredible misunderstandings as Adela's that the races split in India. He wanted, in short, an improbable incident that was only just within the bounds of possibility, if he was to make his point. Such an effect, however, is all but unattainable by the direct techniques in fiction (I would remind the reader again of Thomas Hardy).

Whatever one's opinion of the happening in the caves on the level of story—the level of what happened next—there is

no doubt that Adela's mistake has a further significance. Forster wants us to believe that in India strange things do happen: 'adventures do occur but not punctually' (p. 27). He wants to stress the mystery of India. That, no doubt, is why he never tells us what did happen in the cave.

I cannot agree with Austin Warren that 'he has made it sufficiently clear that no assault on Adela took place. What happened, to Adela and to Mrs. Moore, was the hysterical experience of the caves, bare, dark, echoing. The echo is that of eternity, infinity, the Absolute . . .'<sup>6</sup> This explanation is carefully left open—unless it be for the broken strap of the field-glasses. (The field-glasses, by the way, are most unconvincing. They can be seen four feet down a darkened tunnel only three feet wide and yet can be forgotten in one's pocket.) If one chooses to assume that the strap caught, for instance, on a projecting rock, then all the evidence is there for believing that Adela was the victim of, shall we say, psychopathic delusion. She is a spinster, plain, slightly priggish ('I only want everything to be absolutely clear between us, and to answer any questions you care to put to me on my conduct'—p. 88); she is not really capable of love, perhaps, so that even her sacrifice in the withdrawal of the court case later is censured for being creditable but not including her heart (and to Aziz, particularly, the withdrawal therefore has no great merit); just before she enters the cave she has been thinking with distress that she does not love the man she is about to marry; and her response to the 'attack' is extreme ('Miss Derek saved her life coming just then—she was beginning to fling herself about'—p. 175). But Forster does not draw the conclusion, nor should we. The cause might equally have been the guide; it might even have been 'one of that gang of Pathans who have been drifting through the district' (p. 251). No explanation is ruled out. One need not even be as certain as was Dickinson<sup>7</sup> that Forster knows the answer himself. For to every question in India, as to every sound that is made in the Marabar Caves, the answer is a dull reverberating 'Boum'.

Not enough attention has been paid to the fact that the incident in the Marabar Caves is in many ways a repetition of an earlier section of the story, the car accident on the road to the Marabar Caves.<sup>8</sup> When Ronny and Adela are being

<sup>6</sup> *Rage for Order* (Chicago, 1948), p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> A letter quoted on p. 216 of the biography.

<sup>8</sup> The repetition has been noticed, since the above was written, by Glen O. Allen, 'Structure, Symbol, and Theme in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*', *P.M.L.A.*, LXX. 5 (December 1955). Mr. Allen, however, draws the



taken for a drive by the Nawab Bahadur, there is a bump and nobody knows what has happened; and it is Adela who there also suggests the explanation: 'We ran into an animal'. But was it a buffalo? a hyena? or, as Aziz later maintains, a savage pig? There are no clear tracks. In his Author's Notes to the Everyman's Library edition, Forster briefly informs us that 'The animal once frequented the Indore-Dewas road; I never saw it, but encountered evidence which was startlingly circumstantial' (p. xxxi). But in *The Hill of Devi* he has given a fuller account, and a far more interesting one, of the real-life incident. An engineer and his wife tell the Maharajah how, as they were motoring from Dewas to Indore, 'some animal or other dashed out of the ravine and charged their car'; and the Maharajah, far from being surprised, takes it for granted that the animal was unidentifiable, and explains: 'Years ago I ran over a man there. I was not at all to blame—he was drunk and ran on to the road and I was cleared at the enquiry, and I gave money to his family. But ever since then he has been trying to kill me in the form you describe.' Forster's own comments are that he has often puzzled over the whole matter, 'and it is not the only time that I have wondered whether the Maharajah might possess super-normal faculties'; and he believes that in the incident 'there is an unexplained residuum' (pp. 89-90). So in the novel itself there are hints of another explanation of the collision: Mrs Moore hazards the guess that the accident was caused by a ghost. In a way she is right, for, although she does not know it, nine years before, the Nawab Bahadur, when first he had a car, 'had driven it over a drunken man and killed him, and the man had been waiting for him ever since. . . . None of the English people knew of this, nor did the chauffeur; it was a racial secret communicable more by blood than speech' (p. 103). Yet just as there is the broken strap as the difficulty in the 'psychological' explanation of what happened in the caves, so there are the missing paint and the dent on the side of the car as obstacles to the ghost theory. To complete the parallel, Miss Derek arrives after each incident and carries off the victims in her car; and Adela, just before she asks Aziz the fatal question about wives, thinks of the previous occasion.

As she toiled over a rock that resembled an inverted saucer, she thought, 'What about love?' The rock was nicked by a double row of footholds, and somehow the question was suggested by them. Where had she seen footholds before?

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conclusion that for neither accident should a human agency be held responsible.

Oh yes, they were the pattern traced in the dust by the wheels of the Nawab Bahadur's car (pp. 158-9).

One may note again how nothing in *A Passage to India* has only a single purpose; the car accident has 'plot' value also inasmuch as it leads directly to the engagement of Ronny and Adela. But the main point of the incident is its inexplicability; and that is the 'point' of the Marabar Caves. That, and the emphasis on the existence of evil. The evil which stalks through the Caves is the more serious equivalent in *A Passage to India* of the goblins which stalk through the Fifth Symphony in *Howards End*. And one can trust Forster, as he suggests one can trust Beethoven, because, though he 'chose to make all right in the end', the goblins were there and could return and 'he had said so bravely'.

'An allegory may be as lame as it likes if it walks quietly,' Forster once wrote, reviewing a book of Tagore, in 1914 (*Abinger Harvest* p. 319); and *A Passage to India* is full of these quiet symbolic touches, nearly all of them acceptable on the level of plot but all having some further meaning as well.

On a third example, the author actually comments himself. Ronny and Adela are sitting under a tree watching a polo match, and Adela's attention is diverted to a bird above their heads. 'The common Iora', Forster laconically explains in the Everyman's Library notes. But what he writes in the novel is this:

'Do you know what the name of that green bird up above us is?' she asked, putting her shoulder rather nearer to his. 'Bee-eater.'

'Oh no, Ronny, it has red bars on its wings.'

'Parrot,' he hazarded.

'Good gracious no.'

The bird in question dived into the dome of the tree. It was of no importance, yet they would have liked to identify it, it would somehow have solaced their hearts. But nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else (pp. 89-90).

It may be noted in passing that these three episodes all have some foundation in Forster's own experiences in India. He normally has real places (though not real people) in mind; and the scenery of the Marabar Caves, for example, is based on 'that of the Barabar Hills, near Gya'. The first of the essays under the general title of 'Adrift in India' in *Abinger Harvest* is also particularly interesting in this connection. Forster tells how he set out to see the ruins of Ujjain of which he had

heard. His guide had no idea where they were, and 'the track we were following wavered and blurred and offered alternatives; it had no earnestness of purpose like the tracks of England'. Forster had to find the ruins himself and then find his way back again, getting wet in the process. And there is no 'glow' in his experience at all.

One confusion enveloped Ujjain and all things. Why differentiate? I asked the driver what kind of trees those were, and he answered 'Trees'; what was the name of that bird, and he said 'Bird'; and the plain, interminable, murmured, 'Old buildings are buildings, ruins are ruins.' (p. 300).

The inexplicability of India is itself authentic; India's refusal to be explained in terms of 'fact', one may say, is itself a fact.

How, then, is one to come to grips with this inexplicable land? It is to answer this question, or to suggest a possible answer, that Forster has introduced Mrs Moore.

Mrs Moore, like the first Mrs Wilcox, is a woman advanced in years who has the gift of getting to the heart of a problem. While others 'talk about seeing the real India, she goes and sees it, and then forgets she's seen it' (p. 33). But she is also like Mrs Wilcox in that she is not agreeable or likeable in the ordinary way. Ronny and Adela often seem to her trivial:

She felt increasingly (vision or nightmare?) that, though people are important, the relations between them are not, and that in particular too much fuss has been made over marriage; centuries of carnal embracement, yet man is no nearer to understanding man. And to-day she felt this with such force that it seemed itself a relationship, itself a person who was trying to take hold of her hand (p. 141).

After the arrest of Aziz and her own experience with the echo in the Marabar Cave, she cannot be bothered with all the fuss over the trial and refuses to be dragged in to testify. Knowing that Aziz just could not be guilty of such an act, she is somehow above mere discussion of possibilities. 'Her Christian tenderness had gone, or had developed into a hardness, a just irritation against the human race' (p. 207) and to Adela's attempts to reassure herself about what happened, Mrs Moore answers 'sourly'. In this she resembles not only Mrs Wilcox but also Mr Lucas of the short story 'The Road from Colonus'; Mr Lucas, having alone felt the appeal of the old tree-shrine, cannot be bothered discussing it, once he is away from it; and the death narrowly missed when the tree blew down soon after he left seems to him irrelevant. So it is with Mrs Moore:

She had come to that state where the horror of the universe and its smallness are both visible at the same time—the twilight of the double vision in which so many elderly people are involved . . .

What had spoken to her in that scoured-out cavity of the granite? What dwelt in the first of the caves? Something very old and very small. Before time, it was before space also. Something snub-nosed, incapable of generosity—the undying worm itself. Since hearing its voice, she had not entertained one large thought, she was actually envious of Adela. All this fuss over a frightened girl! Nothing had happened, 'and if it had', she found herself thinking with the cynicism of a withered priestess, 'if it had, there are worse evils than love'. The unspeakable attempt presented itself to her as love: in a cave, in a church—Boum, it amounts to the same (pp. 216-17).

Yet it is through a remark that Adela, falsely, believes Mrs Moore to have made, that she first thinks of withdrawing the charge against Aziz. We are invited to believe that Mrs Moore has a special influence because she *knew* what happened in the car accident and in the cave; she has a kind of mystic vision which carries her straight to the truth. Moreover, her power remains after her death (Forster, like Butler, is clearly most interested in this question of an influence which endures). Fielding tries in vain to announce her death to Aziz: 'It struck him that people are not really dead until they are felt to be dead. As long as there is some misunderstanding about them, they possess a sort of immortality' (p. 265). Among the Indians, in fact, Mrs. Moore is to be revered as a saint.

Moreover, just as the second Mrs Wilcox can replace the first, so Mrs. Moore's children by her second marriage, Stella (who marries Fielding) and Ralph, can replace her. 'My wife's after something' is the best Fielding can do to explain it; Aziz and he and Miss Quested 'are, roughly speaking, not after anything'. And he wonders why Stella and Ralph 'like Hinduism, though they take no interest in its forms' (pp. 331-3).

This is not the only suggestion in the novel that Mrs Moore comes closest to understanding India because she adopts the Hindu view of life. Lionel Trilling suggests that she 'has had the beginning of the Hindu vision of things and it has crushed her' (p. 136). But the Hindu vision of things has not crushed Professor Godbole, and he takes much the same view of the trial as does Mrs Moore, and, to Fielding's distress, instead of talking about it wishes to discuss a suitable name for a High School. It is rather that once one has 'had the Hindu

vision of things', so many questions seem unimportant; and, perceiving their irrelevance, Godbole is bland where Mrs Moore is merely irritated.

Is the novelist suggesting then that in Hinduism is the solution for India? It is clear that the religious theme runs through the novel alongside the theme of personal relationships and of racial conflicts. It is also certain that Christianity, of the ordinary type, is seen as simply inadequate there. Adela is laughed at because 'after years of intellectualism' she 'had resumed her morning kneel to Christianity'.

There seemed no harm in it, it was the shortest and easiest cut to the unseen, and she could tack her troubles on to it. Just as the Hindu clerks asked Lakshmi for an increase in pay, so did she implore Jehovah for a favourable verdict. God who saves the King will surely support the police (p. 220).

Ronny's Christianity is no better; and the Christianity of the missionaries, old Mr Graysford and young Mr Sorley, is also rejected (although their bells call not to Anglo-India but 'fully to mankind') and rejected because it is uncertain of its scope:

In our Father's house are many mansions, they taught, and there alone will the incompatible multitudes of mankind be welcomed and soothed. Not one shall be turned away by the servants on that verandah, be he black or white, not one shall be kept standing who approaches with a loving heart. And why should the divine hospitality cease here? Consider, with all reverence, the monkeys. May there not be a mansion for the monkeys also? Old Mr. Graysford said No, but young Mr. Sorley, who was advanced, said Yes; he saw no reason why monkeys should not have their collateral share of bliss, and he had sympathetic discussions about them with his Hindu friends. And the jackals? Jackals were indeed less to Mr. Sorley's mind, but he admitted that the mercy of God, being infinite, may well embrace all mammals. And the wasps? He became uneasy during the descent to wasps, and was apt to change the conversation. And oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud? and the bacteria inside Mr. Sorley? No, no, this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing (pp. 40-1).

Hinduism has its intellectual absurdities ('the Ganges happens not to be holy here'—p. 1); it is prepared, in Whitman's phrase, to 'risk the ship, ourselves and all'; and its ceremonies can be summed up as 'sacred bewilderment' (p. 299). (This of the ceremony of the Birth of Krishna, which takes up the greater part of Part III and is, incidentally, again founded on

experience.)<sup>9</sup> The greatness of Hinduism, however, is that it does embrace everything, including the Christian mythology; 'by sacrificing good taste, this worship achieved what Christianity has shirked: the inclusion of merriment' (p. 301).<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Hinduism has no difficulties over wasps. Chapter 33 ends with Professor Godbole thinking, at his time of religious fervour, of Mrs Moore and wasps. He does not know that once when she went to hang up her cloak, 'the tip of the peg was occupied' by a small one—'Indian Social Wasp (*Polistes*)' Forster now tells us!—and that she addressed it as 'pretty dear'. But both images come to him, and in his philosophy there is a natural place for both.

Covered with grease and dust, Professor Godbole had once more developed the life of his spirit. He had, with increasing vividness, again seen Mrs. Moore, and round her faintly clinging forms of trouble. He was a Brahman, she Christian, but it made no difference, it made no difference whether she was a trick of his memory or a telepathic appeal. It was his duty, as it was his desire, to place himself in the position of the God and to love her, and to place himself in her position and to say to the God, 'Come, come, come, come'. This was all he could do. How inadequate! But each according to his own capacities, and he knew that his own were small. 'One old Englishwoman and one little, little wasp,' he thought, as he stepped out of the temple into the grey of a pouring wet morning. 'It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself' (pp. 302-3).

Professor Godbole himself is always seen as somehow above the strife around him, 'observing all three, but with downcast eyes and hands folded, as if nothing was noticeable' (p. 81); 'and his whole appearance suggested harmony—as if he had reconciled the products of East and West, mental as well as physical, and could never be discomposed' (p. 76).

The superiority of Hinduism in India is then clearly pointed; perhaps Forster would accept Dickinson's baldly stated opinion

<sup>9</sup> Forster notes that 'the Krishna festival closely follows the great celebration of Gokal Ashtami, which I attended for nine days in the palace of Dewas State Senior, and which was the strangest and strongest Indian experience ever granted me' (Everyman's Library edition, pp. xxxi-ii). Of it he gives a full account in *The Hill of Devi* (pp. 100-19)—an account which is almost as vivid, if not quite as sympathetic, as that in the novel. In spite of his disclaimer: 'It is difficult to make vivid what seems so fatuous. There is no dignity, no taste, no form' (p. 107), he brings out magnificently the 'mixture of fatuity and philosophy that ran through the whole festival' (p. 111). Forster also records that he saw religious plays on the subject in 1912 in Chhattarpur.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *The Hill of Devi*, p. 119.

that 'I think, perhaps, after all, the Hindus took in more of the facts in their religion than most people have done', even if he would certainly also agree with the proviso: 'But they too are children, like the rest of us.'<sup>11</sup> On this view, too, the division of the novel into the three sections—Mosque, Caves, Temple—is all important, signifying not only as Forster has (dare one say?) misleadingly told us, 'the three seasons of the Cold Weather, the Hot Weather, and the Rains, which divide the Indian year',<sup>12</sup> but also three ways of life in India, with something of a crescendo effect.

It is tempting to accept the suggestion (made to me by Professor I. R. Maxwell) that 'Mosque' symbolizes an attempt to establish personal relations which stops short of the ideal because of the restrictive Moslem conception of human brotherhood. If Forster had had this in mind, he would, I think, have made more of it and less of Aziz's general goodness of heart, which is in no sense confined to those of his own belief. It is worthy of note, too, that in a letter reprinted in *The Hill of Devi* he writes: 'I do like Islam, though I have had to come through Hinduism to discover it. After all the mess and profusion and confusion of Gokul Ashtami, where nothing ever stopped or need ever have begun, it [standing on a minaret of the Taj Mahal] was like standing on a mountain' (p. 127). But perhaps 'Mosque', in conjunction with the more or less sterile season of the cold weather, does suggest a limited success in personal relations (though I should think the relations in question were limited because of the English rather than the Moslems).

In the second section, Caves, the hot weather which has been threatening towards the end of the first section arrives; and just as most of the English, unable to bear it, flee before it from Chandrapore, so all personal relationships are made difficult until finally there is the complete break brought about by the evil of the Caves. Differences now threaten to become more important than identity.

Then, finally, with the section called Temple—and the coming of the life-giving rains—differences become irrelevant again and in 'the sacred bewilderment' of the Hindu festival ('God si love'), Godbole at least can feel that 'He was a Brahman, she Christian but it made no difference'—nor did anything else.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in the biography, p. 140. Cf. from *The Hill of Devi*, p. 121: 'Except in the direction of religion, where I allow them much, these people don't seem to move towards anything important'. (My italics.)

<sup>12</sup> Author's notes in Everyman's Library edition, p. xxxi.

Perhaps here is the answer to Aziz's problem of the 'cycle' 'Mosque, caves, mosque, caves' from which he has, only with difficulty, 'got free'—and which seems likely to start again (p. 324).

One must still stop far short of saying that Godbole represents an ideal or that Hinduism is presented as the solution for India. Any such statement makes another supposition—that there *is* an India; and this, too, Forster would reject as an oversimplification.

(We do in *A Passage to India* see India—see it, possibly, as it has never been seen before in literature, in Kipling or anywhere else. Forster even takes the justifiable risk of beginning his novel with a descriptive passage. It is not *only* a descriptive passage, of course. There is symbolism in the English civil station somewhat uncomfortably located on a hill above the mean streets of Chandrapore and sharing with it 'nothing except the overarching sky' with its ineffable suggestion of distance and perhaps of a peace far above the human differences—or 'muddle'—on earth. Moreover it is important to notice that in both the first and last sentences of the chapter there is reference to the Marabar Caves: mention of the 'fists and fingers' of the Hills sounds immediately the ominous note of distant but not too distant ever-present evil (and the very phrase therefore recurs in the novel—for example, on p. 259). There are other passages of this kind, and with these, I feel, Forster has found the proper scope for that rhetorical prose which did sometimes ring false in the earlier novels; and so the Indian summer, the Marabar Caves, the forest near Mau, the religious festival, all are magnificently portrayed. (They are, in a rather special sense, brought to life; for one of Forster's special descriptive gifts is that of using a verb implying life where we should not expect one. Examples are 'League after league the earth lies flat, heavens a little, is flat again' and 'The stones plunged straight into the earth, like cliffs into the sea, and while Miss Quested was remarking on this, and saying that it was striking, the plain quietly disappeared, peeled off, so to speak, and nothing was to be seen on either side but the granite, very dead and quiet. The sky dominated as usual, but seemed unhealthily near, adhering like a ceiling to the summits of the precipices.')

We see India, then, and we also learn certain things about India, particularly its mystery. Forster had noted in the fifth 'Adrift in India' essay, on 'Pan', that 'the East is mysterious enough, mysterious to boring point' and he is at pains to convey that effect in the novel. A typical incident is that of the 'snake'



which Adela would have liked to think she saw on the way to the Marabar Caves. This too is based on Forster's own experience (see *The Hill of Devi*, pp. 63-4) and the comment he made at the time was that in India 'Everything that happens is said to be one thing and proves to be another'. And so in the novel it is stressed that in India there is mystery, 'and yet there was no romance' (p. 147). In this it is the exact opposite of the English Lake District which is 'romantic yet manageable' (p. 144). (The Lake District thus becomes yet another symbol in the novel.)<sup>13</sup> India, 'seemingly so mysterious' (p. 52), contains no privacy; it makes Mrs Moore think of God more but He satisfies her less; India tries to keep men in compartments; and 'there seemed no reserve of tranquillity to draw upon in India. Either none, or else tranquillity swallowed up everything, as it appeared to do for Professor Godbole' (p. 82).

But Professor Godbole isn't India; 'no one is India' (p. 76). Adela may dread living like the Turtons 'while the true India slid by unnoticed' (p. 50), but it is part of Adela's limitation that she should think in such terms, and Forster thinks differently:

'How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home. India knows of their trouble. She knows of the whole world's trouble, to its uttermost depth. She calls 'Come' through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal (pp. 142-3).'

Only if it could be seen from the moon could India have a definite outline; and so no solution of the 'problem' of India is possible.

'Oh, do you feel that, Dr. Aziz?' she [Adela] said thoughtfully. 'I hope you're not right. There will have to be something universal in this country—I don't say religion, for I'm not religious, but something, or how else are barriers to be broken down?'

She was only recommending the universal brotherhood he sometimes dreamed of, but *as soon as it was put into prose it became untrue* (pp. 151-2, my italics).

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that in his 1944 essay on William Arnold (*Two Cheers for Democracy*, pp. 202-6), Forster points out how Arnold in his novel *Oakfield* had constantly used the Lakes as a contrast to India: 'the English lakes gleam in the pages of the book with a radiance denied to the Ganges' (p. 204). This is clearly the more normal use of the Lakes symbol and it is almost the opposite of Forster's own.

Mrs Moore might *know*, but what she knows cannot be explained. "Say, say, say" said the old lady bitterly. "As if anything can be said!" (p. 208). And Fielding and Adela, trying to analyse her gift, must confess that words are inadequate for the purpose.

'Mrs. Moore—she did know.'

'How could she have known what we don't?'

'Telepathy, possibly.'

The pert, meagre word fell to the ground. Telepathy? What an explanation! Better withdraw it, and Adela did so. She was at the end of her spiritual tether, and so was he. Were there worlds beyond which they could never touch, or did all that is possible enter their consciousness? They could not tell. They only realized that their outlook was more or less similar, and found in this a satisfaction. Perhaps life is a mystery, not a muddle; they could not tell. Perhaps the hundred Indias which fuss and squabble so tiresomely are one, and the universe they mirror is one. They had not the apparatus for judging (pp. 273-4).

That, if anything, is the crux of *A Passage to India*.<sup>14</sup>

Paradoxically, it is when a writer is conscious that his subject matter is thus amorphous, untrue as soon as it is put into words, that he is likely to take most pains with the formal construction of his work. (*Wuthering Heights* is a case in point.) Certainly no other novel by Forster is as tightly woven as *A Passage to India*. Of this the clearest evidence is the use throughout the novel of the recurrent phrase or incident. The collar-stud has been mentioned, as well as the repetition in the Marabar Caves incident of the earlier car accident. Lionel Trilling, branding it 'a book which is contrived of echoes', comments on other instances:

Actions and speeches return, sometimes in a better, sometimes in a worse form, given back by the perplexing 'arc' of the Indian universe. The recurrence of the wasp is a prime example, but there are many more. If Aziz plays a scratch game of polo with a subaltern who comes to think well of this particular anonymous native, the same subaltern will be particularly virulent in his denunciation of Aziz the rapist, never knowing that the liked and the detested native are the same.<sup>15</sup> If the natives talk about their inability to catch trains,

<sup>14</sup> Mr Forster seems to me to support this interpretation of the novel by his recent words in the *Observer* ('A View without a Room') 27 July 1958, p. 15: 'India is a Passage for Indians as well as English. No resting place'.

<sup>15</sup> This sadly understates the irony. What the Subaltern says is 'You remember the one I had a knock with on your Maidan last month. Well, he was all right. Any native who plays polo is all right'.

an Englishman's missing a train will make all the trouble of the story . . . However we may interpret Forster's intention in this web of reverberation, it gives his book a cohesion and intricacy usually found only in music. And of all the many echoes, the dominant one is the echo that booms through the Marabar cave (pp. 133-4).

Other instances are not hard to find. Aziz shows Fielding, as a gesture of deep friendship, the portrait of his dead wife; it is this photograph which McBryde, the District Superintendent of Police, will receive with delight after the arrest.

'Photographs of women. Ah!'

'That's his wife,' said Fielding, wincing.

'How do you know that?'

'He told me.'

McBryde gave a faint, incredulous smile, and started rummaging in the drawer. His face became inquisitive and slightly bestial. 'Wife indeed, I know those wives!' he was thinking (pp. 179-80).

One could then almost anticipate that later it would be casually mentioned that McBryde was being divorced: he had been 'caught' in Miss Derek's room. Similarly, single phrases and words, like 'the real India', 'muddle' and 'the red-nosed boy' (of Ronny) tend to recur.<sup>16</sup>

The 'rhythm' of *Aspects of the Novel* may be a slightly too pretentious word to describe exactly the effect of these repetitions; however carefully rhythm is distinguished from over-all pattern, the word continues to suggest an effect which is 'there all the time' and which even in its 'waxing and waning' determines form.<sup>17</sup> The effect of Forster's repetitions of word, phrase, symbol, character and incident may rather be compared to the safety chain on ladies' jewellery. Each incident has its place in a proper chronological scheme; but also each is linked to other incidents before and after, to produce a kind of double linking in the chain of evidence. And nearly always the effect is to increase the irony or point the 'meaning' without undue editorial intrusion.

It is also noticeable that it is far more difficult in *A Passage to India* to extract and quote without context the author's comments 'about the conditions under which he thinks life is carried on'. There are many comments, most of them quotable, like 'any suggestion that he should marry always does produce

<sup>16</sup> McConkey analyses very well the effect of still other repeated words and symbols, particularly 'stone'.

<sup>17</sup> *Aspects of the Novel*, pp. 153-4.

overstatements on the part of the bachelor, and a mental breeze' (p. 124). But even this is not isolated; the statement really indicates the tone of voice in which Fielding replied to Aziz's unlucky question 'Why don't you marry Miss Quested?' and is as legitimate as, but more revealing than, a single adverb. Even 'the world of dreams—that world in which a third of each man's life is spent, and which is thought by some pessimists to be a premonition of eternity' (p. 247) is not gratuitous, in view of the religious theme of the novel as a whole; and 'The Mediterranean is the human norm. When men leave that exquisite lake, whether through the Bosphorus or the Pillars of Hercules, they approach the monstrous and extraordinary; and the southern exit leads to the strangest experience of all' (p. 293) is central to the whole argument. Other comments are so carefully woven in that one is not sure whether they represent the opinion of the author or of one of the characters. 'How indeed is it possible for one human being to be sorry for all the sadness that meets him on the face of the earth . . . ?' (p. 257) may be Forster's philosophy or his paraphrase of Hamidullah's and Fielding's.

Similarly Forster does not in *A Passage to India* take sides against his characters as he sometimes did in the earlier novels; and possibly only once is there a suggestion of an unnecessary jibe. This is at the end of chapter 18, after McBryde has passed his comment on photographs of alleged wives.

Aloud he said: 'Well, you must trot off now, old man, and the Lord help us, the Lord help us all . . .'

As if his prayer had been heard, there was a sudden rackety-dacket on a temple bell (p. 180).

That bell, one may venture to say, strikes the novel's only discordant note.

In brief, Forster has done everything in his power to give *A Passage to India* an even texture. As a result, it is quite unfair to quote single passages from it, even when they are about personal relationships or about India. *A Passage to India* is not a tract, or a series of tracts: it is an experience; and as such it cannot be summarized in abstract terms. It is not, for instance, as some critics have argued, an attempted proof of the superiority of intuition to intellect; it merely raises that question, as it raises many others, and gives the evidence on which answers might conceivably be based. The final effect of it, as of *Howards End*, is the effect which Forster himself has suggested as, short of completeness, the finest a novelist can achieve: 'expansion'.

It will, however, be clear—even if it is also paradoxical—that the book demonstrates that once anything is put into prose, particularly if the subject is India, it becomes untrue. And seen in this way, *A Passage to India* marks a point beyond which the novel, given Forster's theories, simply could not be developed.

## RETROSPECT

MR FORSTER himself is not given to the writing of perorations (unless the conclusion of *A Passage to India* be regarded as such), nor does his own work invite the writing of one. A peroration, it might be said, under pretence of seeing a subject whole, succeeds only in seeing it steadily; and qualifications which have already been made must necessarily be forgotten, with consequent loss to truth.

Most of the critical issues that are important in an assessment of Forster's work have, I hope, been raised in the preceding chapter on *A Passage to India*. To say this is not to suggest that the last novel makes the earlier ones in any sense superfluous. No Forster novel is superfluous—not even *The Longest Journey*, which E. K. Brown so rashly called 'the most purely beautiful of his books'<sup>1</sup> and for which the author himself has a special affection that few of his readers can share. Although no Forster novel is a failure—none could be a failure where there is such characterization and such essential wisdom—it may be asserted with reasonable confidence that it is on three of the five novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*, that his fame will depend. And of these *A Passage to India* is the most profound, without any loss of the grace and symmetry that were such prominent features of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* or of the humanity and social comedy that distinguished *Howards End*.

Even of *A Passage to India*, perhaps, one might complain, as Frank Swinnerton complained of all Forster's novels, that 'however incandescent', it holds 'little warmth'. 'They do not embrace the whole of life', he continued; 'they are more like luminous demonstrations of cause and effect. They arise from deliberately realized ideas, and not from imaginative conceptions'.<sup>2</sup> Forster's particular art in plot-making—an art which I believe Christopher Isherwood once well described as that of making a plot 'go pop at intervals'—is artificial, if one cares to put it that way; and it certainly forbids full identification of oneself with the characters. And those characters are seldom completely 'round'—no doubt because many of them are comic and therefore, according to Forster's theory of the novel, need

<sup>1</sup> *Rhythm in the Novel*, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> *The Georgian Literary Scene*, p. 286.

not be fully drawn. We certainly do not know even Gino or Helen Schlegel as we know Leopold Bloom or a character in Henry James. (Helen is kept at a distance and at a crucial point in the story removed from our view altogether.)

All these criticisms, however, may be made—and have indeed often been made—of Molière, of Ben Jonson, of Congreve, of Jane Austen; and the comparison immediately reminds us that a certain lack of ‘warmth’, to use Swinnerton’s phrase, is essential to some kinds of literary purpose. In particular it seems to be essential to the comedy of manners; and it is to the tradition of the comedy of manners that Forster’s novels are perhaps best related. In Forster as in Congreve, the obvious contrivance of situation is not too great a price to pay for the wit and the wisdom that are demonstrated *by* the situation.

Perhaps it would be true to say that Forster’s interest in art is not *primarily* for art’s sake. He is, first of all, a man who has something worth while to say; the artistic problem is a consequence of this and is not, as it were, the original motive. His approach to the novel is rather different from that of James, for example; Forster, one feels, would have had comparatively little interest in solving the purely technical problem which was set for James by the tale that gave rise to *The Turn of the Screw*. He was concerned to find a way of making a statement about personal relations that would be effective and artistic too; and the quest led to the complexity—and artistry—of *A Passage to India* but also to a conviction (possibly wrong) that more than this the novel simply could not ‘hold’ if it was to remain an art form at all. For, as Forster has also said, in the lecture ‘The Raison d’Être of Criticism in the Arts’:

The work of art . . . so far as it is authentic . . . presents itself as eternally virgin. It expects always to be heard or read or seen for the first time, always to cause surprise. It does not expect to be studied, still less does it present itself as a crossword puzzle, only to be solved after much re-examination. If it does that, if it parades a mystifying element, it is, to that extent, not a work of art, not an immortal Muse but a Sphinx who dies as soon as her riddles are answered.<sup>3</sup>

This, then, was the opposite danger from which the novel had to be saved. And it may well be that *A Passage to India* continues to provide the maximum food for thought—continues on re-reading and reconsideration to ‘expand’ as far as a novel can expand—without so parading its ‘mystifying element’ as to be open to the charge of being a crossword puzzle too.

When a writer has so much that is valuable to say and so distinctive a way of saying it, one anticipates that he will often be imitated. Forster's influence, however, does not seem to have been great. This may be because his fame was relatively slow in growing; it may be that Kafka and the creed of allegory tended to replace what was probably the healthier impetus, the impetus towards 'expansion' in the novel.

Certainly I think that Cyril Connolly claimed far too much when he wrote that from Forster's anti-'Mandarin' style, of 'extreme simplicity, the absence of relative and conjunctive clauses, and everyday choice of words' and so on, derived 'much of the diction, handling of emotional situations, and attitude to the reader of such writers as Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, David Garnett, Elizabeth Bowen'.<sup>4</sup> One would have thought that it is precisely in the handling of the kind of emotional situation in which Forster is *not* particularly distinguished—such as the love scene—that the skill of a Katherine Mansfield or an Elizabeth Bowen lay; and Katherine Mansfield, for one, had criticisms of Forster to make that would seem to rule out influence of the type suggested (and she has admitted that Tchekov and others were more influential as stylistic models).

It may be that Forster's influence skipped a generation, as so often happens. One certainly sees a greater similarity to his style and outlook among the novelists writing in the 'forties and 'fifties: P. H. Newby, for instance, sometimes reminds us of Forster when he writes of the differences between the Western and the Middle Eastern mind, as do C.P. Snow and others when they write of Sawstonian academics; and Angus Wilson says that he has been 'influenced enormously' by Forster's 'ethic', even though he feels the need 'to soften the rigours of what I feel to be his Calvinism, perhaps by knocking some of his saints on the head and by liberating some of his damned'.<sup>5</sup>

'Attitude to the reader' may well be another way in which Forster was influential; and in particular his novels may have served—as did *Aspects of the Novel* later—to give encouragement to those who were unwilling to yield entirely to the James-Lubbock-Conrad preoccupation with the point of view and who opposed the Flaubert doctrine of the author's necessary 'impersonality' in the work of fiction.

Then last, but not least, it may well have been invaluable for a novelist to remind other novelists early in the twentieth

<sup>4</sup> *Enemies of Promise* (London, 1928), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Encounter*, November 1957, p. 52.



century that one did not need to be solemn to be great. Forster, with his command of humour, wit and irony, was perhaps to the novel of his time what Shaw was to its drama—a proof that a work of art could be comic without ceasing to be serious. The man who is confident in his truth, as Andre Maurois once put it,<sup>6</sup> can *afford* to joke.

But then in *A Passage to India* Forster demonstrated (among other things) not only the difficulty of saying something profound in artistic form but also the necessary incompleteness and indeed falsity in all literary statement. Whereupon, with a diffident smile, as it were, he retired into comparative silence and left the novel to those who were more easily content with something less than perfection.

<sup>6</sup> *Poets and Prophets* (London, 1936), p. 103.

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